



Full Length Article

The enclosure and exclusion of Australia's 'Pacific family'

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A B S T R A C T

Since 2018 the Australian government has displayed anxiety about its apparently declining influence in the Pacific Islands region due to the growing presence of China, a power with potentially inimical interests. The government has long been anxious about threats to its physical security that may arise from the Pacific Islands region. But reports in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu were a wake-up call that its ability to influence the actions of Pacific Island countries (PICs) was limited. In response to its anxiety, the government has engaged in 'worldmaking' by seeking physical and ontological security through a discursive and practical 'geopolitical project'. This project has tried to enclose PICs through a 'domestication strategy' that has aimed at normalising Australia's presence in the Pacific Islands region. Yet despite these efforts at worldmaking through enclosure, the government has simultaneously made a parallel world that excludes Pacific peoples from Australia. To unpack this apparent contradiction, this article draws on ontological security scholarship and uses discourse analysis techniques to analyse the government's discursive efforts at enclosure by framing the Pacific as its 'family' and 'home', and practical efforts at enclosure through two schemes within which bordering practices are evident: labour mobility and scholarships. Drawing on criticisms of the exclusionary consequences of those schemes, this article then analyses how the government's migration rules seek to exclude Pacific peoples from Australia. Based on this analysis, it argues that the contradiction between the two worlds made by the government's foreign and security discourse and policy represent its longstanding ambivalence about its proximity to, and relationship with, PICs and Pacific peoples.

Since 2018 the Australian government has displayed anxiety about its apparently declining influence in the Pacific Islands region due to the growing presence of China, a power with potentially inimical interests. The government has long been anxious about threats to its physical security that may arise from the Pacific Islands region. But reports in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu – although denied by both governments – were a wake-up call that its ability to influence the actions of Pacific Island countries (PICs) was limited. This realisation challenged the government's assumptions about itself and its capacity, as it has long viewed itself – and been viewed by others – as having a 'substantial and special responsibility' in the region (Howard, 2001; Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003). It has consistently identified that in the order of its strategic priorities, the security of the region is second only to Australia's own (DoD, 2016). In response to its anxiety, the government has engaged in 'worldmaking' (Goodman, 1978) by seeking physical and ontological security through a discursive and practical 'geopolitical project' (Schwabe, 2020). This project has tried to enclose PICs through a 'domestication strategy' (Ram, 2015, p. 21) that has aimed at normalising Australia's presence in the Pacific Islands region by describing PICs as Australia's 'Pacific family' and 'home' (Albanese, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; DFAT, 2022a; Morrison, 2018; Wong, 2022a,b). Yet despite these efforts at worldmaking through enclosure, the government has simultaneously made a parallel world that excludes Pacific peoples from

Australia, including through its bordering practices.

To unpack this apparent contradiction, I begin by outlining my analytical framework, which draws on ontological security scholarship and uses discourse analysis techniques. My framework challenges 'empiricist concepts of borders' and instead recognises that borders are socially constructed parts of the 'discursive landscape of social power, control and governance' (Newman and Paasi, 1998, p. 196; Ó Tuathail, 1996). To situate my analysis, I provide background about how the government has understood Australia's proximity and relationship to PICs. I then analyse the government's discursive efforts at enclosure by framing the Pacific as its 'family' and 'home' and practical efforts at enclosure evident in two schemes within which bordering practices are evident: labour mobility and scholarships. Drawing on criticisms of the exclusionary consequences of those schemes, I then analyse how the government's migration rules seek to exclude Pacific peoples from Australia. Based on this analysis, I argue that the contradiction between the two worlds made by the government's foreign and security discourse and policy represent its longstanding ambivalence about its proximity to, and relationship with, PICs and Pacific peoples.

1. Analytical framework

Worldmaking involves actors attempting to make sense of reality by reimagining, experiencing, and practising the world (Stanek, 2021). To

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do this, they must ‘divide and combine, emphasise, order, delete, fill in and fill out, and even distort’ elements from existing worlds (Goodman, 1978, p. 17). Worldmaking is critical to ontological security, whereby actors use autobiography to narrate their ‘self-conception’ based on their place relative to others and their ‘agential powers’ as ‘the gravitational center of the world’ (Bruner, 1991, p. 76). For actors to be ontologically secure, this self-identity must draw on a ‘consistent feeling of biographical continuity’ and on the maintenance of predictable, routine practices that permit them to ‘bracket out’ the ‘potentially almost infinite range of possibilities’ open to them to perform everyday activities (Giddens, 1991, pp. 53, 243, 36–37; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008).

Ontological security is an appropriate lens to analyse the Australian government’s efforts at the enclosure of the Pacific Islands region and exclusion of Pacific peoples. An ontological security lens captures the dynamics of subjectification that the government engages in because Australia’s sense of self reflects liminality. This liminality arises because Australia’s geography means that it is ‘neither here nor there’ (Turner, 2017 [1969]: 95), but instead caught between its proximity to Asia and the Pacific and its sense of historical and cultural affinity with the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) (Higgott & Nossal, 1997; 2008). This sense of liminality is ‘not a pre-given attribute’, but ‘a subject position which itself is discursively constituted’ and contextual, which means that Australia’s sense of self can be positioned as ‘liminal within a particular discourse’, but not necessarily in others (Rumelili, 2012, pp. 496, 497).

I am interested in the liminality of Australia’s sense of self evident in the government’s discourses of Australia’s physical and ontological security. Due to Australia’s geographic proximity to Asia and the Pacific and increasing migration from those regions since the early 1970s, a discourse has developed of an Australian multicultural identity. But the ongoing constitutive effects of Australia’s longstanding economic and cultural links to the UK and US have generated an ‘overlapping’, at times contradictory, identity discourse (Rumelili, 2012, p. 503). And while Australia has developed cooperative security relationships throughout Asia and the Pacific, the government looks primarily to the US to guarantee Australia’s security – at times from perceived threats emanating from or through Asia and the Pacific (Higgott & Nossal, 1997; 2008). This was exemplified by the 2021 announcement of the AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US (Biden, Morrison, and Johnson, 2021). AUKUS built on Australia’s military treaty with the US, which has guided the government’s defence and security imaginary as the US’s ‘dependent ally’ since it was signed in 1951 (Bell, 1993). It also built on the deep integration that has developed from the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence sharing partnership between ‘Anglosphere’ states: Australia, the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Canada (Vucetic, 2011).

The liminality of Australia’s sense of self has generated both ontological and physical insecurity: the government lacks a sense that Australia has a stable self-identity due to overlapping identity discourses, and lacks physical security due to its perception that threats can come from or through its near region, yet it is distant from its security guarantor. This ontological insecurity has generated anxiety stemming from the government’s ‘fear of abandonment’ by Australia’s major security guarantor, the US (and before that, the UK) (Gyngell, 2021). Actors try to manage anxiety by seeking ontological and physical security through discursive and other practices (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020) across multiple scales (Jeffrey, McFarlane, and Vasudevan, 2012). In the case of the Pacific, I argue that the Australian government has sought security through efforts to enclose the region and its people, and by simultaneously excluding them across multiple dimensions: cultural, economic, and physical (Madanipour, 2003).

To analyse the Australian government’s discursive practices, and mindful that ontological security scholarship emphasizes the ‘constitutive role of discourse and narratives’ (Mitzen, 2018, p. 1374; Andrews et al., 2015; McAdams, 2006), I analysed government discourse (public

statements and policies adopted by the government in the form of official communications, e.g., government documents, speeches, and statements), media reports, and commentary. My discourse analysis sought to identify whether Australian leaders, policymakers, and commentators have attempted to enclose the Pacific Islands by framing Australia’s relationship the region in terms of ‘family’ and ‘home’. The process of framing involves ‘select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman, 1993, p. 52). I identified my sources through searching relevant government websites, the media database Factiva, and the archives of the major Australian commentary websites. My discourse analysis involved the ‘double reading’ of my identified texts to develop an ‘inventory of representations’ of the Pacific (Dunn and Neumann, 2016, pp. 116–117) to identify the key frames used. Conscious of intertextuality, I focused on how my selected texts referred to each other, and were in turn referenced, reinterpreted, and reinforced by each other (Doty, 1993).

I started my period of analysis in 2018, when the Australian government led by then Prime Minister Scott Morrison first adopted the ‘Pacific family’ framing. Morrison’s Coalition government was not the first to use the term ‘family’ in relation to PICs – for example, former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had referred to ‘our family of nations’ within the Pacific Islands Forum (Rudd, 2009a) or the ‘Pacific family’ (Rudd, 2009b) – but it was the first to use the term repeatedly and as its dominant framing. The conservative Coalition government was replaced by a more progressive Labor one in May 2022, which has continued to use the Pacific family framing. I ended my analysis in early May 2023, when I finalised revisions on this article.

To analyse the Australian government’s policy practices, and conscious that its efforts to either enclose the region or exclude Pacific peoples involve creating a boundary, I also analysed two Australian government schemes within which ‘bordering practices’, that is, ‘activities which have the effect of constituting, sustaining or modifying borders’ (Parker and Adler-Nissen, 2012: 776; Vaughan-Williams, 2009) are evident: labour mobility and scholarships. I also analysed the impact of Australia’s migration regime on Pacific peoples. The consequences of Australia’s practice of deporting criminal non-citizens are analysed in another article in this special issue (McNeill, 2023). Because ‘borders do not simply ‘exist’ as lines on maps but are continually performed into being’ (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729) and can ‘connect as well as divide’ (Rumford, 2012, pp. 895–896), I also considered how the government’s foreign and strategic policies have played a role in ‘shaping political life’ (Agius and Edenborg, 2019, p. 57).

2. Proximity and anxiety

The Australian government has long perceived that it needs to seek security from the Pacific Islands. In words that both captured the *longue durée* of government’s thinking and have influenced it since (Wallis, 2017), the 1986 Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities stated that the Pacific Islands (and Indonesia) will always be the region ‘from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed’ (Dibb, 1986, p. 4).

Even before British colonialists landed in 1788 in what would become known as Australia, they were anxious about the security implications of its proximity to the Pacific Islands and consequently keen to enclose and control the region; the ‘Letters Patent’ given to Captain Arthur Phillip before he left Britain to establish a British colony in Australia, defined the territories over which he and his successors were to exercise jurisdiction as ‘all the Islands adjacent in the Pacific Ocean’.¹

¹ New South Wales, Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Sydney, 1870–71, 967–8.

The colonialists' anxieties grew during the late nineteenth century, as the French and Germans began to move in and the Dutch reached further westward. To deal with the encroachment of these potentially hostile forces, in 1883 the colony of Queensland attempted to annex Papua to spur Britain into acquiring control. The British objected, but later annexed it in 1888. In 1901, in the first session of the Australian parliament, Prime Minister Edmund Barton expressed his hope that Papua (referred to in the Parliament as British New Guinea) would one day 'be a territory, perhaps, a State of this Commonwealth'. He also envisaged that Australia might acquire Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) to make a 'federation of the sea', given the perceived importance of acquiring territories 'from which the proximate danger may arise'.² But there was little public or political appetite for Barton's proposal, and although Britain transferred control of Papua to Australia in 1906, and Australia acquired German New Guinea and Nauru under League of Nations mandates (the latter in cooperation with Britain and New Zealand) following the First World War, in the inter-war period the government's anxieties abated.

This lack of public and political appetite for Barton's proposal reflected a long history of Pacific people being portrayed as too 'unsophisticated' and 'unsuited' to settle in Australia and as a potential source of social problems (Hamer, 2014, p. 104). The ways in which Pacific people – particularly from the Melanesian sub-region of (contemporary) Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and New Caledonia – were racially stereotyped during the colonial period as 'black, savage, tribal, violent, and physical' as a justification for the 'colonial project of constructing and containing a colonizable, oppressable, and exploitable' object has been authoritatively explored by Tracey Banivanua Mar (2006: 3). This framing helped to justify the Australian government's White Australia policy from 1901, which led to the forced deportation of Pacific workers who had been brought to Australia in the preceding decades (Banivanua Mar 2006; Davies, 2019).

The Second World War renewed the Australian government's anxieties about the Pacific Islands region. By January 1942 Rabaul, the capital of New Guinea, had fallen to the Japanese. The Japanese then conducted aerial raids of Port Moresby, the capital of Papua, and bombed Darwin in February 1942. By May 1942 their advance reached its southernmost point when Japanese forces landed in Solomon Islands. The war threatened American supply lines to Australia, and for many Australians, the threat of invasion felt existential (Horner, 2013).

After most PICs emerged from colonisation during the 1960s to early 1980s, the Australian government's initial anxiety about potential Soviet influence was replaced after the Cold War by concerns about internal challenges to stability and security. From the late 1990s, this saw the government frame the Pacific Islands region as an 'arc of instability' (Dibb et al., 1999) made up of 'our failing neighbour[s]' (Wainwright, 2003). As then Prime Minister John Howard warned in 2003: 'We know that a failed state in our region, on our doorstep, will jeopardise our own security' (Howard, 2003). While these characterisations were critiqued (Chappell, 2005; Fraenkel, 2004; Teaiwa, 2006), they influenced government discourse (Ayson, 2007) and justified an era of 'new interventionism', during which Australia led a major intervention in Solomon Islands, smaller interventions in PNG and Nauru, a peace monitoring mission in the Bougainville region of PNG, and implemented intrusive governance reforms elsewhere (Dinnen, 2004).

Although the Australian government's era of interventionism was coming to an end, its 2016 Defence White Paper continued to identify 'state fragility' as a risk for PICs, due to 'slow economic growth, social and governance challenges, population growth and climate change', 'ethnic tensions, political instability ... environmental degradation and natural disasters' (DoD, 2016, pp. 48, 55). The government was anxious that apparently fragile PICs could be vulnerable to the influence of

potentially hostile powers. Indeed, the 2016 Defence White Paper reiterated earlier concerns that instability could 'lead to increasing influence by actors from outside the region with interests inimical to ours' (DoD, 2016, p. 48). Those anxieties grew due to the deteriorating relationship between China and Australia's ally, the US, and the increasing perception that potentially threatening Chinese 'influence' in PICs was growing (Wallis et al., 2022). These perceptions were enhanced by reports, in April 2018, that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu. They were bolstered by Solomon Islands and Kiribati switching their diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 2019, and then by China attempting to lease a Second World War-era Japanese naval base in Solomon Islands and to update strategically located airstrips in Kiribati. Consequently, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update warned that: 'Australia is concerned by the potential for actions, such as establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region' (DoD, 2020, pp. 3–4). These anxieties continued to build, with a security agreement between China and Solomon Islands in March 2022 leading commentators to conclude that China was poised to build a military base there – although this interpretation was contested by the Solomon Islands government.

3. Enclosing Australia's Pacific 'family'

To try to manage its anxiety, from 2018 the Australian government engaged in both discursive and practical efforts to seek ontological and physical security. One way it did this was by trying to enclose the Pacific Islands region through framing it as Australia's 'Pacific family' and 'home'. These efforts relied on framing Australia and PICs as 'connected as members of a Pacific family' (Morrison, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020a; 2020b). This reflected that home can be a source of ontological security because 'a psychological need for home is central ... to subjectivity' (Mitzen, 2018, p. 1374; Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall, 2004), as home is assumed to be a place of 'familiarity and comfort' that people 'move towards for ontological security' (Taylor, 2013, p. 397) and where people experience their most significant 'affective family and social' trust relationships (Wiles, 2008, pp. 116–117). Indeed, the 'protective cocoon' and 'basic trust' that can develop within families is seen as central to ontological security (Giddens, 1991, p. 40). Therefore, family and home 'constitutes identities – people's senses of themselves are related to and produced through lived and imaginative experiences of home' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p. 24). This approach reflected that narratives of 'family' and 'home' can perform a political function, helping to 'naturalise certain person-place relationships in political projects' (Hopkins and Dixon, 2006, p. 175).

The Pacific family discourse was intentionally affective (Wallis, 2021); Morrison (2018; 2021a) spoke about Australia's 'respect, love, commitment' for 'our family in the Pacific, who we love dearly'. Former Minister for International Development and the Pacific Alex Hawke (2019) described 'the love of the Pacific' in Australia. Then Minister for International Development and the Pacific Zed Seselja (2021a) commented during the COVID-19 pandemic that 'the people of Fiji have been in our hearts'. Reflecting the emphasis on analogies of family, from 2018 Australian leaders also started referring to the Pacific as Australia's 'home' (Morrison, 2018, 2019b, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f; Bishop, 2018a; Payne, 2019b; Seselja, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). This built on decades of Australian leaders referring to the region as Australia's 'backyard' (Keating, 1991) or 'patch' (Howard quoted in Forbes, 2004).

When articulating the Pacific family discourse Prime Minister Morrison also emphasised the importance of religion (Wallis, 2021). Morrison frequently referred to the 'connections that are being forged between us', including in 'our churches' (2019b; Hawke, 2019). Indeed, it has been argued that the Pacific family discourse reflected Morrison's religious beliefs and his time undertaking church visits to Fiji before taking office (O'Callaghan, 2019). Those visits reflected longstanding links between Australian and Pacific churches that developed initially through British missionaries (Samson, 2017). Morrison also took

² House of Representatives, *Australian Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 6, 1901–02, 7079–91.

practical steps to connect the Pacific family framing to church links, inviting 15 Pacific church leaders and more than 200 Australian Christians to Parliament to launch the 'Friends of the Pacific' parliamentary group and discuss what being part of the 'Pacific family' means (Beach, 2019). It also manifested in practice through the creation of the Pacific Church Partnerships Program under the government's Pacific step-up (DFAT, 2022a).

The Australian government's discursive efforts at enclosure were accompanied by practical efforts to naturalise Australia's presence in the Pacific Islands region. From 2018 the government implemented an extensive 'Pacific step-up' policy that included initiatives focused on enhancing development, security, diplomatic, and people-to-people links. This built on Australia's provision of approximately half of all development aid to the region (Lowy Institute, 2022). Notably, apparently to counter growing Chinese lending, the government created a A\$2 billion (now A\$4 billion) Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific and allocated an extra A\$1bn to its Export Finance and Insurance Corporation to support investment. It also committed funding to major infrastructure projects, some reportedly as direct counters to offers by China. As part of its intent to remain the region's 'principal security partner' (DoD, 2016, p. 17), the government created the Australia Pacific Security College, Pacific Fusion Centre, and committed to a larger military presence, including through an upgraded Pacific Maritime Security Program under which it has provided patrol boats (accompanied by Australian personnel) to PICs since the 1980s, and to redevelop the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, PNG. Australia agreed a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017, a *vuvale* (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019, a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership with PNG in 2020 (with the two states committing to finalise a bilateral security treaty in mid-2023), and a security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022.

The discursive and practical aspects of the Australian government's efforts to enclose the Pacific Islands region have been accompanied by labour mobility schemes and scholarship opportunities for Pacific people in which bordering practices that have involved 'transnational domestication' (Silvey, 2004, p. 253) are evident. The government has claimed that labour mobility opportunities are a 'symbol of our enduring commitment to the region' and would 'deepen friendships between our countries to help build a better future' (Bishop, 2018b). It has framed labour mobility as an 'integral part of Australia's efforts to promote greater economic cooperation and integration with the Pacific' (Bishop, 2018c). Since April 2022 Australia has offered a single labour program for people from certain PICs: the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. The PALM scheme consolidated two prior programs: the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). The SWP began in 2008 as a pilot to meet Australian horticultural labour shortages and to contribute to economic development in the Pacific. It became permanent in 2012. The PLS began in 2018 and offered Pacific workers three-year visas to work in low- and semi-skilled occupations in Australia. The PALM scheme allows people from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste to work in Australia in a sponsored position for either: short-term (seasonal) contracts of up to nine months (although multi-season visas are available which allow people to work for nine-months each year for four years, provided they return home at the end of each seasonal contract); or long-term contracts of up to four years.

Positive views of Australia's labour mobility schemes have been expressed in several PICs (Newton Cain, Cox, and Presterudstuen, 2020). Their major benefit for Pacific people is through the remittances that they generate, which are often used to support workers' families and invest in housing or businesses. Over the 2013–2017 financial years, approximately \$143,854,000 in remittances went to PICs from workers in Australia under the SWP, with an average net gain of A\$9000 per worker, which is equivalent to three years wages in many PICs (World Bank, 2018). In some PICs, remittances represent an important source of financial support; in Samoa they constitute about 18 percent of GDP, and

in Tonga about 40 percent of GDP. Indeed, when compared to aid, labour mobility has been framed as providing PICs with 'greater agency' (Ackman and Taulealo, 2020).

Therefore, the SWP and PLS were popular, and demand exceeded their capacity to absorb workers (Howes, 2020). One survey of Pacific seasonal workers found that 91 percent would recommend the SWP scheme (World Bank, 2018), and the average seasonal worker returned to Australia between three and four times (Howes, 2018a). Yet Stead (2019: 153) points out that these surveys often miss the 'ambivalences' that many Pacific workers feel about the programs – they appreciate the opportunity to earn often lifechanging sums of money, but, for example, find prolonged separation from their families difficult and are aware of the 'stark asymmetries' inherent in its structure and of 'patterns of exploitation' (Stead, 2021, pp. 309, 310).

In addition to labour mobility schemes, the government offers scholarship programs. The government's main scholarship program is the Australia Awards, which fund students from PICs, and elsewhere (primarily Asia), to study in Australia 'to contribute to the long-term development needs of Australia's partner countries' (Australia Awards, 2022a: 22). The awards cover students' tuition, travel, living expenses, and other costs associated with studying in Australia. In 2022, the government funded 484 Australia Award scholarships to people from PICs (240 of whom were from PNG), from a total of 1235 scholarships for long term study (it also awarded 840 short term scholarships to students from Asia). The government also funds Australia Pacific Awards for students to study at institutions in the Pacific, with 512 studying across the region in 2022 (Australia Awards, 2022b).

The Australia Awards are explicitly aimed at improving relationships between Australia and Pacific peoples, as they are seen to build 'enduring people, country and professional links' (Australia Awards, 2022a: 22). The awards handbook recognises that, 'For Australia, the Awards build an engaged and influential global network of leaders, advocates and change-makers and establish a network of ambassadors across the world' (Australia Awards, 2022a: 22). One of the intended outcomes of the program is 'Alumni viewing Australia, Australians and Australian expertise positively' (Australia Awards, 2020: 9).

Australian government surveys suggest that 'overall satisfaction' with the Australia Awards is high, ranging between 96 percent and 99 percent satisfaction between 2013 and 2020 (Australia Awards, 2020: 5). This high rating was said to be based on 'the usefulness of the knowledge and skills' that students gained, students' 'inclination to recommend Australia as a destination for study', and their 'satisfaction with entitlements and other assistance' (Australia Awards, 2020: 5). When these headline statistics are disaggregated, on average, between 2013 and 2020, 51.4 percent of respondents who were ongoing students indicated that they were 'very satisfied', and 44.75 that they were 'satisfied' (Australia Awards, 2020: 5). There have been few other analyses of how award participants from the Pacific view the program. One recent study found that the participants appreciated the opportunity to develop social networks with other award scholars and international students, connections to their diaspora, and new knowledge and skills (Pearson, McNamara, and McMichael, 2022). Yet, as in the case of Pacific seasonal workers, survey respondents also indicated ambivalences about the program: while they appreciated the opportunity to make difference in their home country, they found separation from family and community difficult, they faced cultural barriers, and they struggled to integrate with Australian students and the broader Australian community (Pearson, McNamara, and McMichael, 2022).

4. Excluding Australia's Pacific 'family' from 'home'

The ambivalences Pacific workers and students have expressed about Australia's labour mobility and scholarship programs suggest that, while the Australian government has engaged in discursive and practical efforts to enclose the Pacific Islands region as Australia's 'family' and 'home', many Pacific workers and students have had reason to find their

experience in Australia exclusionary. Accordingly, this section examines the culturally, economically, legally, and physically exclusionary consequences of Australia's labour mobility and scholarship schemes, and its migration rules.

The PALM scheme (and before that, the SWP and PLS), had culturally exclusionary effects because Pacific workers were not permitted to bring their families to Australia, even when they were in Australia for four years. The new Labor government has undertaken to allow (initially) 200 long-term Pacific workers to bring their families, to give them access to childcare subsidies and family tax benefits, and to trial giving them access to Medicare, Australia's universal healthcare system (Services Australia, 2023), as Pacific workers usually have to fund their own health insurance. However, it is unclear whether workers' children will be able to access free public education in all parts of Australia (Beazley, 2023). If they cannot, this will make bringing their families impractically expensive for most workers.

Although Australia Awards scholarship holders are permitted to bring their families with them to Australia, this program can have other culturally exclusionary consequences. The number of Pacific scholarship holders is very small (484 in 2022) relative to the total number of international students in Australia (613,327 in 2022) (DoE, 2022). As noted, while Australia Awards scholarship holders have reported developing strong social networks with other Awards scholars and other international students, they also reported that 'people in the wider Australian community were not as friendly as people back home' (Pearson, McNamara, and McMichael, 2022, p. 201). Others report facing 'unconscious biases, racism, and difficulty finding relevant work experience alongside their studies' (Habru et al., 2023, p. 5). As a result, as with many international students, they can 'struggle to connect with Australian society during their study experience', resulting in 'marginalisation and negative impacts on students' mental and physical well-being' (Pearson, McNamara, and McMichael, 2022, p. 201; Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore, 2017; Tran and Gomes, 2017).

The PALM scheme (and before that, the SWP and PLS) has also had economically and legally exclusionary effects. Although Pacific workers are legally entitled to the same rights and pay as Australian workers, they are excluded from the same privileges, as they must work for their sponsor employer, or another approved employer, and they can only work in the position and industry for which they have been granted a visa. The difficulty that Pacific workers face moving between employers has exacerbated the risks of abuse, as employers have been described as having 'almost-total control over workers' lives' (Doherty, 2017). Perhaps empowered by this control, some employers are alleged to have deducted too many expenses from workers' pay, as workers are obliged to reimburse their employers for their living, health insurance, and travel expenses. For example, in 2021 there were reports that some workers were promised wages of A\$900 per week, but were left with less than A\$300 after deductions for expenses (Rice, 2021). There have also been reports of unsafe working conditions (McCarthy, 2018; JSCFADT, 2017), the deaths of several Pacific workers (Thompson, 2018), and about poor living conditions and limited access to medical care, leading to adverse health effects (Bailey, 2020; Davey, 2017). The new Labor government has committed to 'improving arrangements for worker portability', although they must still work only for approved employers (PALM, 2023). In its 2023 Budget, the Labor government also committed A\$370.8 million over four years to 'expand and improve' the PALM scheme, to 'support sustainable growth and improve support for workers in line with Australian and Pacific aspirations' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023a, p. 119). Significantly, A\$27.3 million of this spending is directed to the Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman 'to ensure workers' rights are protected, including through undertaking education, monitoring, and compliance and enforcement activities' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023b, p. 19).

The economically and legally exclusionary factors evident during the early years of Australia's labour mobility schemes has led to them being described as a form of 'coloniality', whereby 'the pervasive

reverberations of colonialism' continue to be felt in the present (Stead and Altman, 2019, p. 3). Parallels have been drawn with the nineteenth-century 'blackbirding' of Pacific labourers from European colonies in the Pacific Islands region (Nishitani and Lee, 2019, p. 168; Connell, 2020; Stead, 2019). Blackbirding refers to the 60,000 people from what are now Fiji, New Caledonia, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, who were brought to Australia between 1863 and 1901, some willingly, but many by coercion, to work on cane fields in Queensland. As many as 15,000 died due to the harsh conditions and brutality of the work, which was akin to slavery (Stead and Davies, 2021). Contemporary Pacific labour mobility schemes have similarly been described as 'slavery' in the Australian media, and they were discussed in the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs inquiry into modern slavery (JSCFADT, 2017; Stead and Davies, 2021). Indeed, there are parallels between the restrictions placed on contemporary Pacific labourers and those on indentured labourers a century before, with these measures used as 'a mechanism for facilitating and controlling' them (Stead and Altman, 2019, p. 5). It remains to be seen whether improvements being developed by the new Labor government can adequately address these issues.

Characterisations of Australia's Pacific labour mobility schemes as slavery have arisen despite their claimed 'pastoral care' dimensions, such as employers providing accommodation and transport (although the costs are reimbursed by Pacific workers) (Stead, 2019, p. 146), pre-departure briefings on the rights of all workers arriving in Australia, and a 24-h hotline that workers can contact about their concerns (Rose and Howes, 2021). These mechanisms are often regarded as inadequate (Bailey, 2018; Howes, 2018b). For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that workers prefer to contact their country's high commission rather than call the hotline. Indeed, as Stead (2019: 146) observes, these pastoral care provisions function 'as a control on the movement of workers, amid a context of Australian governmental anxiety about Pacific workers 'absconding' and overstaying their visas' (Stead, 2019, p. 146).

The PALM scheme is also physically exclusionary, as it is explicitly not a pathway to permanent residence in Australia, and participants must have a 'genuine intention to stay temporarily in Australia' (Home Affairs, 2022). This is even though many become well-integrated in Australia and would appreciate an opportunity to permanently migrate (Rose, 2020). Indeed, the government has been preoccupied by its concern that Pacific workers will become 'absconders', that is, leave their approved employers and seek work elsewhere (PALM, 2021). As Nishitani and Lee (2019: 169) observe, 'the label 'absconders' indicates intentional illegality, denotes an abandonment of contracted responsibilities and assumes that the workers will become overstayers'. This echoes the White Australia policy and has generated a narrative about Pacific overstayers as "illegal immigrants' stealing jobs and costing taxpayers' (Nishitani and Lee, 2019, p. 160).

The Australia Awards scholarship program is also physically exclusionary as it is explicitly not a pathway to permanent residence in Australia. One of the first conditions stated in the government's information about the program is that: 'Scholars are required to leave Australia for a minimum of two years after completing their scholarship. Failure to do so will result in the scholar incurring a debt for the total accrued cost of their scholarship' (Australia Awards, 2022a). This requirement ensures that it is difficult for scholarship holders to access other migration routes to Australia, as the primary way that most international students stay in Australia after their studies is by obtaining a Temporary Graduate Visa (subclass 485, Post-Study Work stream). The Temporary Graduate Visa allows international students to live, study, and work in Australia for between two and four years after they have finished their studies, and is often a pathway to longer-term migration options. As international students must apply for this visa within six months of holding their student visa, this rules out Australia Award recipients, who must return home for two years at the conclusion of their studies. At a minimum, some Pacific Australia Award scholarship

recipients have suggested that they should be able to stay in Australia for at least a year after their studies ‘to gain professional experience’ and develop their networks in Australia (Habru et al., 2023, p. 11).

The requirement for scholarship recipients to return home is justified in the Australia Awards handbook on the grounds that ‘to ensure the development impact of Australia Award Scholarships, all awardees much return home on completion of their studies so they can contribute to development in their country’ (Australia Awards, 2022a: 23). On its face, this justification seems reasonable, given that the scholarship program is part of the Australian government’s aid program. There are also concerns that a ‘brain drain’ of skilled workers migrating from PICs and other developing countries can have a negative developmental effect (Lowell and Findlay, 2002). But it deprives students of their agency to decide how they want to use their education and where they want to do so. As Elizabeth Foster Wright-Koteka (2006: 178) argued after studying the experiences of scholarship holders and other migrants from the Cook Islands, ‘Cook Islanders are not objects in the process of development’, but instead ‘active agents’, capable of making migration decisions for themselves. The fact that Australia Award scholarship holders commonly refer to themselves as being ‘bonded’ to return home by the Australian government, with echoes of the language of indenture, highlights the paternalistic nature of this requirement. Moreover, expanding skilled migration may have positive economic consequences for PICs, which have large, young populations, but small labour markets, by reducing demographic pressure and generating remittances (Chand, Clemens, and Dempster, 2022; Doyle and Sharma, 2017).

Other Australian government bordering practices also seek to physically exclude most Pacific peoples from settling in Australia. The options for Pacific people to permanently migrate are limited. In general, applicants must obtain a permanent visa to stay indefinitely in Australia until they can apply for citizenship. There are three primary means of obtaining a permanent visa. First, the family-stream, for people who are the partners, children, parents, or dependent relatives of Australian citizens or permanent residents. Second, the work-stream for people considered to be highly skilled, who are typically sponsored by an employer, or have skills identified by the Australian government. Third, the business or investor-stream for people who plan to invest or develop a business within Australia, or who already own a business or have major investments.

While none of these permanent migration pathways formally discriminate against Pacific people, they can informally, as many Pacific people have difficulty meeting the requirements of the family-stream, given there are relatively few Australian citizens of Pacific origin (with the 2016 census identifying 262,057 people (Howes and Liu, 2022), although this figure may not be reliable, given that some Pacific people do not disclose their heritage or are undocumented (Enari and Taula, 2022)). Many Pacific people also have difficulty meeting the requirements of the work and business/investor streams, given structural challenges to development in the region. The Australian government sought to mitigate this somewhat by founding the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) in 2007, ostensibly to provide Pacific workers with skills to increase the likelihood that they would qualify for a work-stream visa (Howes, 2021), and later for the PLS. But only five percent of APTC graduates migrated to Australia or New Zealand by 2021 (Curtain and Howes, 2021). This is primarily because a work-stream visa requires sponsorship by an Australian employer, yet there was very little support for Pacific trainees to develop the relationships necessary to be offered this sponsorship. While the Pacific Labour Facility created in 2018 was intended to help address this, it has focused on connecting Pacific workers with Australian employers under the PLS and SWP (now PALM) and not more broadly. The new Labor government has created a Pacific Engagement Visa to allocate 3000 permanent migration opportunities via lottery to Pacific people from 2023 (DFAT, 2022b), but this initiative represents a fraction of Australia’s annual migration intake, which generally averages about 200,000 people (ABS, 2022). Pacific scholars have also questioned whether

support will be provided to facilitate migrants’ travel to Australia, how ‘potential brain-drain risks’ will be addressed, whether migrants from ‘climate-threatened’ PICs will be prioritised, whether existing PALM workers will have access to the visa, and whether substantial consultations with Pacific leaders and other stakeholder groups were undertaken before the scheme was announced (Rimon et al., 2023).

Pacific peoples also face difficulties even visiting Australia, as they must obtain a tourist visa before they arrive. Australia has three categories of tourist visa. First, the Electronic Travel Authority (ETA) visa (subclass 601) is granted to passport holders from 32 countries, almost all advanced economies, and allows for a stay of up to three months in Australia within a 12-month span. It costs A\$20 to apply for online and approval is typically granted immediately, or if delayed, within 12-h. Second, the eVisitor visa (subclass 651) is granted to passport holders from 36 countries – all European – and allows for a stay of up to three months within a 12-month period. It is free and is generally granted within 30 days. Third, the Visitor Visa (subclass 600), which is open to all passport holders applying outside Australia. It costs A\$150 and allows entry for up to 12 months. In 2019 Australia introduced the Pacific-Australia Card, intended to give Pacific leaders (from the political, business, church, and sporting spheres) priority immigration processing at Australian airports, priority processing of their tourist and business visitor visas (subclass 600), and longer validity on their visas.

The only tourist visa for which most citizens of PICs can apply, the Visitor Visa, is the most expensive, has the least streamlined application process, and has the slowest approval rate – only 75 percent of applications are accepted within 26 days. This has led to frustration in the Pacific, where Australian citizens can generally obtain visitor/tourist visas on arrival (Newton Cain, Cox and Presterudstuen, 2020), with Pacific people reportedly asking: ‘What kind of family demands you get a visa before visiting?’ (quoted in Bohane, 2019).

5. The negative aspects of family and home

The economically and culturally exclusionary consequences of the Australian government’s labour mobility and scholarship programs and the physically exclusionary consequences of its migration regime, which sit alongside its efforts to enclose the Pacific Islands as ‘family’ and ‘home’, highlight that people can have ‘negative and ambivalent feelings’ toward their home (Manzo, 2003; Wardhaugh, 1999). While much of the ontological security literature emphasizes a ‘happy phenomenology of the home’ (Sibley, 1995, p. 94), exploring its negative aspects opens questions about the politicised nature of home that recognise ‘the processes of oppression and resistance embedded in ideas and processes of home’ (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p. 22), as ‘homes are always part of power structures’ (Handel, 2019, p. 1048).

This directs our attention to the power structures within many homes, and the families that reside within them, which mean that home can represent a place of both ‘belonging and alienation’ (Blunt and Varley, 2004, p. 3). In many cultures the family is ‘the linchpin of the gender structure’ (Okin, 1989, p. 14). As ‘images of gender, race, and nation are never far apart’, the Australian government’s use of the family metaphor can be interpreted as assigning certain ‘family members’ to ‘the ranks of second-class citizens’ who lack agency, which echoes relationships between ‘colonisers and the colonised’ (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 761–762; Balibar, 1991). Indeed, where Australia ‘sits’ in its claimed Pacific family has been interpreted in different ways, which reflects the diversity and complexity of the ways in which family structures are understood across PICs. In 2014 former Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum described Australia as a ‘big brother’ (quoted in O’Malley, 2014), in 2019 former Australian High Commissioner to Samoa Sara Moriarty described Australia as an ‘uncle’ (speaking on AIW, 2019), and in 2018 former New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters described Australia as a ‘cousin’ (2018). In 2019 then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison referred to ‘our Pacific brothers and sisters’ (2019d). But the paternalistic nature of Australia’s

labour mobility and scholarship programs, and the government's repeated emphasis on its role as a 'donor', and PICs as 'aid recipients', suggest that it may really understand itself as a 'parent'.

The exclusionary consequences of the Australian government's bordering practices also highlight the gap in understanding between what the government means by 'family' and how it is interpreted in the Pacific Islands. For example, [Tarcisius Kabutaulaka and Katerina Teaiwa \(2019\)](#) critiqued the previous conservative government for having 'ignored the interests and priorities of Pacific countries resulting in increased militarisation rather than environmental, cultural and human security desired by islanders'. This was particularly evident in the government's lack of serious action to address climate change, 'which island countries identify as the single most important security issue for them' ([Kabutaulaka and Teaiwa, 2019](#); [Teaiwa, 2019](#)). They argued that this approach clashed with the government's 'family friendly aspirations', as 'kinship comes with important expectations, values and responsibilities. In the Pacific, relatives can make serious requests of each other, and it's a major cultural faux pas to say no' – yet 'Australia's said a big no'. Kabutaulaka and Teaiwa's characterisation of how family obligations are understood in the Pacific reflects the importance of 'indigenous social protection systems' based on reciprocity that have been developed by Pacific communities 'as a means of building resilience and developing adaptation strategies' ([Ratuva, 2014](#), p. 42; [Nanau, 2018](#)). Indeed, in the Pacific 'the kinship system still provides the cushion on which families fall back in times of economic and social risk' ([Ratuva, 2014](#), p. 49). Family is central to Pacific peoples' identities, which are 'not individualistic; they are situated within broader collective groups such as extended family, villages, and Island nations' ([Enari and Taula, 2022](#), p. 124; [Enari and Fa'aea 2020](#)). But the government's bordering practices, for example, are not based on reciprocity, since most PICs offer visa-free, or visa-on-arrival, travel to Australians.

Moreover, because the idealised 'sentimental' family is assumed to be 'based in affection' ([Okin, 1982](#), p. 65) – something the Australian government has tried to stress in its Pacific family discourse – this implies that families 'do not need to be regulated by principles of justice' as they are 'nonpolitical' ([Okin, 1994](#), p. 26). This highlights the potentially depoliticising effect of the government's Pacific family framing – by attempting to frame Australia's relationships with PICs as affective and sentimental, it seeks to minimise the agency of PIC 'family members' to rationally pursue their (geo)political, economic, environmental, and other interests ([Okin, 1982](#)). Tensions between Australia and PICs – such as over the Coalition government's failure to take substantive action to respond to climate change, which PICs identify as an 'existential threat' ([PIF, 2018](#)) – are therefore relegated to be resolved quietly in the private, rather than public, domain, obscuring dynamics of 'naked power and vulnerability' ([Okin, 1994](#), p. 27). As Prime Minister [Morrison \(2018\)](#) observed when pressed about PICs' dissatisfaction with his government's approach to climate change: it is 'not to say we will always agree. But that's not the true test of friendship or family. Tell me a family that always agrees'. This dynamic has not been missed by Pacific leaders, with Palau's national climate change coordinator, Xavier Matsutaro, observing that: 'Australia is a bit of an anomaly, because ... they're basically sometimes as far right as [then US President Donald] Trump in some of their views on climate change ... But then on a regional basis they've actually given a lot of support to our region'. He continued 'it's like you are in a relationship and you get abused by your spouse but at the same time they feed you and clothe you and things like that ... You could say it's a bit of a dysfunctional relationship' (quoted in [Lyons and Doherty, 2018](#)). This highlights how efforts at enclosure frequently involve 'violence, and modes of appropriation, manipulation and exploitation at different scales' ([Vasudevan, McFarlane, and Jeffrey, 2008](#), p. 1642), echoing colonialism ([Stoler, 2006](#)).

6. Conclusion

The Australian government has responded to its sense of physical and

ontological insecurity arising from its proximity to the Pacific Islands region by engaging in two contradictory approaches. On the one hand, it has sought to enclose PICs through discursive efforts to narrate the region as 'family' and 'home', and practical efforts that include labour mobility schemes and scholarship programs. On the other hand, it has culturally, economically, and physically excluded Pacific peoples from Australia through its migration rules and through several of the impacts of its labour mobility scheme and scholarship program – with the underlying paternalistic message being that Pacific peoples can come to Australia temporarily to earn or learn, but not as skilled migrants who may contribute to the long-term development of Australia (recognising, of course, that temporary workers and students also contribute to Australia).³ This contradiction exemplifies the government's long-standing ambivalence about its proximity to, and relationship with, PICs and Pacific peoples. This ambivalence stems in part from the liminality of Australia's sense of self: the government is caught between the perception that to address the perceived security threats that arise from its geographic proximity to the Pacific Islands it needs to claim a place in the Pacific Islands region, but it has simultaneously exhibited a long-standing perception of cultural difference to the region and consequent impulse to exclude Pacific peoples from Australia.

The exclusionary consequences of Australia's labour mobility schemes and scholarship program also highlight that 'family' and 'home' do not necessarily have a happy phenomenology – they can have negative, ambivalent, or isolating connotations, particularly as most families have unequal power structures. This suggests that the government's 'Pacific family' framing may be depoliticising and diminish the agency of PICs, both by attempting to frame Australia's relationships with PICs as affective and sentimental, rather than based on rational interests, and by positioning Australia as the 'parent' that needs to 'care for' its PIC 'family members'.

The depoliticising effect of the Australian government's attempts to enclose the Pacific Islands region reveals the instrumental nature of its 'Pacific family' framing. While various Australian leaders have spoken of claimed affection for the Pacific Islands region, the government's efforts to enclose the region have been driven primarily by its physical and ontological insecurity. And much of this insecurity stems from the government's growing anxiety about the potential threats posed by China's developing presence in the region. Indeed, the perception that Australia's labour mobility program had instrumental purposes was aided by the fact that the PLS was expanded from its six initial PIC participants to nine PICs and Timor-Leste ahead of the November 2018 APEC meeting in Port Moresby, 'amid a concerted push to counter growing Chinese influence in the region' ([Packham, 2019](#)).

My analysis reveals how narratives of 'family' and 'home' can be used by actors – including states – to make 'their new demands for political power seem less threatening' ([Brickell, 2012](#), p. 583) as they can attempt to 'spatially construct the norm' of a state's presence 'through a process of *domestication*', whereby the state's presence is framed as normal ([Ram, 2015](#), p. 22). This highlights that 'home is about bringing space under control' ([Mitzen, 2018](#), p. 1381). While the Australian government has framed its efforts to enclose the Pacific Islands region in affective and sentimental terms of 'family' and 'home', the exclusionary effects of its labour mobility schemes, scholarship program, and migration rules suggest that its underlying goal has been to control the region to advance Australia's physical and ontological security.

Declaration of competing interest

Declarations of interest: none.

³ The author thanks Maima Koro for this observation.

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