In this essay, I want to explore the apparent discrepancy between historical experiences of migration and aesthetics theories of “migrancy” that have emerged from contemporary cultural studies. I shall posit a link between the metaphorisation of migration and the – often utopian – spatial poetics/politics of postcolonial theory. I shall examine this link by looking at two recent works by cultural theorists that attempt, in different ways, to bridge the gap between postmodern “travelling theory” and postcolonial cultural politics. These works – Paul Carter’s *Living in a New Country* (1992) and Iain Chambers’ *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994) – can be seen as examples of a new “migrant aesthetic” which uses poststructuralist theories of displacement to account conceptually for migrating people, goods and ideas within the so-called New World Order. I shall assess both the benefits and the limitations of such an approach; finally, I shall consider the extent to which the current cultural studies debates surrounding migration shed light on Australia’s contested status as a postcolonial settler society.

I want to begin, though, with four no doubt unfairly decontextualised quotations on the subject of migration: the first from a political scientist (Aristide R Zolberg); the second from a sociologist (Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny); the third from an economist (Robert E B Lucas); and the fourth from a cultural theorist (Iain Chambers). Here are the quotations, which I shall juxtapose without further comment:

*If we conceive of a world which consists, on the one hand, of individuals seeking to maximise their welfare by exercising a variety of choices ... and, on the other, of mutually exclusive societies, acting as organized states to maximise collective goals by controlling the exit or entry of individuals ... the deviant character of individual migration is thus seen to be related to a fundamental tension between the interests of individuals and the interests of societies. (Zolberg 7)*
Migration results from structural and anomic tensions … and is a process by which such tensions are transformed and transferred … [Two cases may be cited. In the first, an] individual may have a more or less balanced status configuration within a societal system, but may experience anomic tension because he or she is a member of a power deficient system … In such a case, the member may give up system membership status and migrate to another system with a lower power deficit or a power surplus … [In the second, an] individual experiences an anomic tension which can be traced back not to the external position of the system but to the internal status quo. If the individual unit perceives the chance of achieving a reduction of the anomic tension internally as low, the individual can try to achieve an improvement of status configuration by emigrating. (Hoffmann-Nowotny 70)

It is … perhaps natural to consider weighing the pros and cons [of migration] within a cost-benefit framework … [T]his type of study would divide the population into various categories: children, semi-skilled men, professional women, and so on. The emigration or immigration of each is then viewed as a project to be subjected to cost-benefit criteria … I shall assume the objective is one of efficiency, though in principle it is quite possible to introduce distributional weights recognising perhaps a greater concern for the incidence of costs and benefits on lower income groups. (Lucas 104)

In the oblique gaze of the migrant that cuts across the territory of the Western metropolis there exists the hint of a metaphor. In the extensive and multiple worlds of the modern city we, too, become nomads, migrating across a system that is too vast to be our own, but in which we are fully involved – translating and transforming what we find and absorb into local instances of sense … It is, above all, here, that we are inducted into a hybrid state and composite culture in which the simple dualism of First and Third Worlds collapses and there emerges what Homi Bhabha calls a ‘differential communality’, and what Felix Guattari refers to as the ‘process of heterogenesis’. The boundaries of the liberal consensus and its centred sense of language, being, position and politics, are breached and scattered as all our histories come to be rewritten in the contentious languages of what has tended to become the privileged topos of the modern world: the contemporary metropolis. (Chambers 14)

The day-to-day struggles of many contemporary migrants within today’s so-called new world order encounter a further level of conflict here in the competing jargons of academic prose. This essay is in part about the difficulty of reconciling the often convoluted language of academic abstraction with the equally complex lived experience, in both past and present, of individual migrants and migrant groups. I shall argue (as many academics do) for a dialectical understanding of migration as both adaptable conceptual tool and ongoing sociohistorical process; I shall also argue – with some reservations – for an inter- and/or multidisciplinary methodology with which to analyse migration as an intricate nexus of social, political, economic and historical forces. This line of thinking tallies with several recent studies on migration, from the literary/geographical