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### **The Spectacle of Detention: Theatre, Poetry and Imagery in the Contest over Identity, Security and Responsibility in Contemporary Australia**

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## **The Spectacle of Detention: Theatre, Poetry and Imagery in the Contest over Identity, Security and Responsibility in Contemporary Australia<sup>1</sup>**

**Prem Kumar Rajaram**

This is a paper about the detention of asylum seekers in Australia. The detention process in Australia, and quite feasibly in other countries, may be studied as a performance. The techniques of detention, and the discourses surrounding these, create or perform particular images or meanings of detainees, and consequently, of ‘refugees’, ‘asylum seekers’ and of people of particular ethnic backgrounds. The paper is concerned with in the *spectacle* of detention. The performance of refugee identity creates a spectacle, a theatre of cruelty, inanity, absurdity and violence designed for the consumption of a public identified and cohered by the spectacle itself. Detention becomes a performance, the displaying of a series of images for the consumption of a public whose membership and moral thresholds are simultaneously suggested or enforced by the spectacle. That is, the spectacle of detention in Australia exists, in part, to present a performance to an electorate, a performance which at once draws the outlines and limits of what it is to be ethical and, indeed, political in Australia. By focusing on the performative and creative aspects of detention, the paper intends to highlight the instrumentality of the detention process and, consequently, the normative production of the moral and political limits of ‘Australia’ that are taken to reflect political or social necessity. Such moral thresholds derive from and are vindicated by territorial resolutions of life, where a proper, safe and prosperous existence is distinguished by its location within sovereign states and remarkable for its consequent ceding of the responsibility to make discriminatory judgements about people to the offices of the state. Thus the thresholds that arise from these are not universal or necessary: they are contingent upon particular power structures that assert the normalcy of territorialised life. The territorialisation of life affixes a gradated or hierarchical form of relating to other human beings. How other human beings are identified and related to are influenced and impeded by fundamentalities of the territorial discourse on humanity.

The spectacular existence of detainees has the important by-effect of distancing them from their humanity, and from the realisation of that humanity by others. The practice of incommunicado detention contributes to the intangibility of refugees’ humanity: their existence is spectacular; they exist as pliable images, approximating to a reality instrumentally created. Imagistic humanity becomes the point of contact for those in solidarity: protestors and activists have, arguably, re-circulated and reiterated the imagistic existence of refugees. Yet it is also from within this imagistic veneer that a striking re-exploration of the limits of community, security and, indeed, humanity may arise.

Alongside state performance, the paper will look at the theatre of detention as played by detainees themselves. Having established that the Australian government uses the imagery of detainees rioting (for example) to foster their own ends, this paper will then look at different images created by detainees themselves in order to convey alternative perspectives on detention, and consequently of identity, community and

security. These images include the physical theatre of self-harm, the placing of one's body on the razor wire, the sewing of one's lips: these are forms of violent theatre with the body as the stage. With the government controlling the mainstream representation of asylum seekers, the use of the mute body, to which asylum seekers have been confined, is a subversive act of re-appropriation and re-presentation of the meanings and identities of asylum-seekers. Other forms of representation used by asylum seekers, rendered virtually mute, are poetry, art and music, sometimes in collaboration with refugee pressure groups. The paper will also look at poetry by detainees as a means of conveying meanings of identity, community and security subversively different from that perpetuated by the norm.

Central to this paper and underlying all aspects of it will be a journey I made to Baxter and Villawood detention camps in November 2002. This journey involved negotiating the spatial restrictions on movement in contemporary, post-Bali and post-*Tampa*, Australia. It was a halting journey, encountering and having to negotiate the state and its proxies performatively asserting themselves, calling my identity into question and impeding or constraining the spaces within which I could move. There was no trough of conclusive meaning at the end of the journey, there was no finality. Rather there was a reminder of the fundamental contestability of meanings and identities, and consequent notions of community, security and responsibility.

### **1. Setting the stage**

The intention of this paper is to look at the detention of asylum-seekers in Australia as spectacle. It does so in order to demonstrate two principle points, both with a number of sub-points within. The two principle points are:

- i. That detention is a performative act of the state. I argue that the act of detention and the imagery of detention as presented by organs of the state may be understood as a performance of the state. This is the state asserting itself, asserting its moral and political limits and the particular account of spatio-temporal relations within. From this performance thus comes the re-assertion of particular logics of humanity, security, community and responsibility. I thus suggest an important relationship between the state and the violence of asylum seekers that it wishes to distance itself from. That violence, which is attributed to that of an alien culture, arises, ironically, from the culture of incarceration and the legislation that underlies it (Pugliese, 2002). The violence arises from a culture of surveillance and control with respect to asylum seekers in Australia. The state thus in performing itself also performs, or creates, the identities of asylum-seekers. A pertinent question, asked by Joseph Pugliese is, 'what sort of detainee does the Australian state need?' (Pugliese, 2002, para. 25). What sort of asylum-seeker is required in order to maintain the spatio-temporal logics of the nation-state and in particular its notions of humanity, security, community and responsibility?

- ii. Presenting alternative identities through violence and poetry. The spectacular forms of protest undertaken by detainees over the last two years, whether of a poetic or violent nature (or poetically violent), appear to demonstrate the power of performance to present alternative identities and solidarities than that preferred by the Australian state. This section looks at the capacity of alternative forms of expression, theatrical forms of expression, as a means of exercising agency by people violently overdetermined by Australian processes of incarceration and surveillance. The essay will focus especially on poems by detainees. Poetic language can resist the repetitive violence of conceptual language and the conceptions of time and spatiality embedded therein. The language of contemporary Australian discourse on refugee issues is confused and rife with vested interests. Terms like ‘asylum-seeker’ and ‘illegal immigrant’ and ‘refugee’ are indiscriminately inter-changed in a hodge-podge of symbolic meaning (and violence). Categories of identification can serve to reinforce the norms and mores of the Australian nation-state. Poetic language, on the other hand, particularly that used by the asylum-seekers Mohsen Soltanyzand and Mehmet al Assad present images and senses of asylum, and of asylum-seekers, which highlight the profound ‘undetermined-ness’ of not only asylum-seekers but human beings in general. That is, the demonstration of the humanity of asylum-seekers in the face of their overdetermination, incarceration and muting points to forms of identification and solidarity beyond the particular spatio-temporal logics of community, identity and responsibility that underlie or vindicate the overdetermination of asylum-seekers (Soltanyzand, 2003; Al Assad, 2002).

Thus the first section of the paper looks at the ‘instrumentalisation’ (Pugliese, 2002) of the bodies of asylum-seekers. This refers to the determination of detainee identity and the consequent usage of these determinations to create a spectacle that represents the sum of social relations between Australian citizen and asylum-seeking alien. The identity of the alien becomes reduced to a series of images, conjoined to form a social relation with ‘the norm’, itself perhaps a spectacular creation. The instrumental reduction of the asylum-seeker releases a spectacular series of images about them that exists *in place of* their humanity.

An important qualification and nuancing of spectacle and the commodification of imagery which perhaps both Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard are inattentive to is the asymmetry of power relations which lead to gradated forms of subjugation within what may or may not be a “fundamentally spectaclist” (Debord, 1967; Baudrillard, 1994; Hussey, 2001) society. A process that may be called the territorialisation of human life sets up moral distinctions between certain forms of life. Most pertinently they distinguish between citizen and non-citizen, between the normal or the regular and the aberrant (Soguk, 1999). The capacity of the norm, here the Australian state, to contain the aberrant within strictly confined zones incommunicado, means that the difficulty of relating to detainees on a human level results in opinions and feelings regarding detainees being formed very much with recourse to a mediated spectacle, a collage of symbolically violent images. The level of violence undertaken by a ‘spectaclist society’ is varied.

Those at a particularly base level, at the bottom end of asymmetrical power relations, have a more pressing and pertinent case regarding the extent and force of the violence generated against them.

The second section of the paper thus tries to find within that subjugating, demeaning and dehumanising spectacular existence a means of resistance. Michel Foucault argues that in order for power relations to exist, in order for there to be fundamentally an exercise of power, the passive party has to have an element of resistance; otherwise there would be no exercise of power by the subjugator (Campbell, 1998). If there were no relation of power, if there were no resistance, the relation would be simply between an actor and an empty *thing*. There are three important points that I glean from this:

- i. First, the Australian state's imagery of detainees requires that there be an element of danger which can vindicate or justify incarceration and surveillance (Pugliese, 2002). It is this element of danger and fear, which presumes a certain amount of freedom and the capacity to resist, which allows for the continued processes of incarceration, surveillance and subjugation. The idea of resistance is thus *built into, inherent in*, the very spectacular creation of detainees. The discourses of freedom and danger, and of the need to confine and control in order to protect the Australian norm from the dangerous aberrant, presume that there is the possibility of resistance. Thus, such 'resistance' can be understood as part of an ongoing game, an addition to the dehumanising collage of the meaning of asylum-seekers. Resistance, in the form of violence, can be expected and in a way welcomed as a means of reasserting the spectacle. Riots and rebellions in the camps are carefully monitored and images are painstakingly displayed on screen and on print and are relentlessly brought up by organs of the state.
- ii. Yet the presumption of the capacity of the state to swallow up and re-word resistance, re-integrate it into a facile spectacle, presumes a homogeneous or docile consumer. The very necessity of a certain element of freedom to resist, and thereby be dangerous, in the Australian state's image of detainees may be the focal point of an actual resistance, one that stretches across the symbolic violence of dichotomies between different sorts of human being and the abbreviated conceptions of solidarity, community and responsibility that ensue therefrom. Often the freedom is confined to the body and the capacity to use the body symbolically, through the sewing of lips or through hunger strikes, can demonstrate or bring to focus those very forms or economies of representation. That is, the conscious use of symbolic forms of violence can highlight the ways in which spectacle is created and the vested interests in this creation. Such a demonstration of economies of representation can highlight the way in which the collage of images of the detained asylum-seeker is created in ways intended to suggest her alienness and the innocence of the Australian nation-state in her alienating behaviour of self-harm (Pugliese, 2002). The repetition and reiteration of the violence and protest and the

explanations of the violence by the nation-state, linking it often to a fundamental deviance in the asylum-seeker, bring home or emphasise the tenuousness of these claims. The tortured attempts at innocent outrage on the part of the government have less and less credibility when people are continuously engaged in violence. There is a sense that the consumer of the spectacle has become attuned to the government's role in creating brutal structures that generate violence. Roland Bleiker argues that an aesthetic perception of 'reality' suggests that not only are the meaning of events or things necessarily representations but because they are representations located in particular spatio-temporal contexts then an aesthetic perception is aware of the incapacity of the interpreter to summarily assert the incontestable meaning of an image. There is always an excess. This excess, this undetermined, thus forms the basis of resistance (Bleiker, 2001) and the reminder of a plethora of different interpretations of events means that the possibility of other interpretations of violence, including ones that point to government responsibility for violence, are possible.

- iii. Both the above forms of resistance may, in one way or another, fit into Baudrillard's conception of resistance as simulacrum. The ends of resistance tend in Baudrillard's view to be rather disenchanting. What happens to noble pursuits is an anti-climactic reassertion in one way or another of abiding dichotomies and approaches. What occurs, in other words, is a change in the content of politics with the form of politics, what gives it its character, continuing. I will argue that the possibility of a challenge to the form of politics, that which gives us a particular style of politics, is thinkable. The discursive aspect of politics means that how we think of the political is mediated by its articulation: it is the representation or articulation of meaning of the spectacle that is important and not the spectacle *itself*. Conceptual and descriptive language simplifies and can carry with it the mark of the stronger power. This is particularly pertinent in the devastatingly asymmetric nature of power relations between asylum-seeker in detention and the Australian state. Thus I argue that poetry that specifically seeks to question the forms of meaning, that put meaning on trial and unfold its genealogy or etymology (Adorno, 1970/1997: 153), can provide the basis for a sustained critique of the political forms that give us particular dichotomous ideas of solidarity, community, security, responsibility and identity.

This paper begins with a brief examination of the idea of 'spectacle'. The second part of the essay looks at the spectacle of detention as a creation of the state performing itself. The third part of the essay looks at the theatre of detention as a form of resistance.

### **Spectacle**

The detention of asylum-seekers in Australia occurs as a spectacle. Detention serves to obscure the humanity of asylum seekers while simultaneously exaggerating an instrumentalised or commodified collage of images about asylum seekers that stands in

the stead of their humanity. The interaction between the spectacle and the audience provides the basis for resistance. The other point that is important is that reducing detention to spectacle is an act or offshoot of surveillance and the desire to control within strategies of surveillance. One deals increasingly with the image: the encounter with the alien asylum-seeker is a fundamentally mediated one. The construction of the detention spectacle involves a dehumanising process, the promotion of the image before the real. The third point that is important is the relative asymmetry of power relations between asylum seeker and state. This is particularly important for while one may argue that all we have are images, representations of reality and not the real itself, the particular confined and heavily scrutinised existence of the asylum-seeker in detention means that the substitution of their lived reality with image is of particular importance.

Guy Debord argues that all life has become spectacle. Playing on Marx, he writes, “in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord, 1967, thesis 1). For Debord the spectacle is the central organising element of an image-obsessed world. The life of society is taken over by the commodity which transfixes and transmutes experiences into a spectator sport. Rather than being actors, Debord argues, modern society renders us passive spectators (Pinder, 2000). It is important to note, as I have earlier, that for Debord images do not exist without meaning, rather they form the basis of social relations: “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” (Debord, 1967, thesis 4).

While the detention of asylum seekers is not obviously rooted in a capitalist society (though there is the abiding spectre of the Wackenhut Corporation), there is evidence of the way in which the substitution of humanity with a mediated image, in effect the dehumanising of the alien asylum-seeker, allows for (and perhaps even amounts to) the commodification of that image, for the appropriation of the image of the asylum seeker by capitalist modes of production. An example of such commodification of lived experience is the following advertisement lampooning protests by detainees at Woomera by Nando’s, a fast food chicken joint:





Figure 1: Nando's advertisement. (Gotting, 2002)

A potentially subversive asylum seeker experience is recoded into the mechanics and matrices of capitalism's "extraordinary hybridising energy" encompassed in its capacity to "recuperate what was originally intended as opposition and sell it as a commodity." (Critchley, 1999: 139). Debord argued that the spectacle is not to be understood as a random or happenstance collage, it is rather an outcome of a collective *Weltanschauung*, a world vision that has become materially translated (Debord, thesis 5). The disruption and challenge of riots and escapes from Woomera, the insecurity that this generates, is, with relief at its abatement, appropriated into the trivial. The capacity of late capitalism, by which I refer to not narrow market mechanisms in their isolation but the world vision generated by western capital and financial markets and flows and the states that encourage these, to reappropriate revolt and re-assert the priority of a "language of forces and markets" (Critchley, 1999: 140) thereby effectively re-concealing its directly attributable or auxiliary injustices and violence upon which its metaphysics depends is remarkable. There are shades of al-Sahhaf here, the comic face of the once threatening Iraqi 'regime' of Saddam Hussein, now adorning dolls and television advertisements. Meanwhile at the tail end of the war in Iraq, amidst deportation plans for Iraqi refugees in Australia, the federal government agency, Australia Council, has agreed to fund the making of a computer game entitled, *Escape from Woomera* (Sydney Morning Herald, April 30 2003).



**Figure 2: Still from 'Escape From Woomera' (Nicholls, 2003)**

Yet in this appropriation which seemingly trivialises and renders even more irrelevant asylum-seeker humanity, the advertisement (and the computer game) reinvokes the presence of the other in the sovereign discourse of the self. The fluidity of capitalism can be subversive: it can use and replay the commodity of the asylum seeker in ways other than that intended by the government. The instrumental reduction of the meaning of asylum-seeker humanity, contains within it, and perhaps requires, that the elements of danger and fear are maintained. The commodity of the asylum seeker itself is difficult to contain, once released it becomes so much fodder for a creative capitalism and can highlight aspects of the commodity that the government would rather it did not. The Immigration Minister's response to the computer game is to lambaste the promotion of "unlawful behaviour" (Sydney Morning Herald, May 30 2003). The essay's argument maintains however, that the creative energy of capitalism promotes a limited resistance or revolt. Capitalism, even in its subversive use of commodified images, lacks the critical mindset to trace the genealogical roots of its emergence, what it relies on, and possibilities for addressing fundamentally its injustices, violence and waste (Critchley, 1999: 140). To my mind, such a resistance is possible within a poetic resistance that precisely calls to mind the temporal and spatial limitations that engender the ontological and epistemological exclusions and oclusions upon which both the discursive representations of the territorial imagination and of late capitalism rest. Two of the central occupations of this essay are thus the outlining of how meaning is limited by certain spatio-temporal restrictions repeated and reinforced in the conceptual public language; and then by demonstrating the capacity of different forms of poetic writing to articulate experience and identity in ways that subvert the suffocating concepts and trajectories imposed by these restrictions.

Debord's work on the spectacle is often distinguished from Baudrillard's. While in Debord's there is an abiding moralistic tone, a sense of the need to resist this compulsion to blank and empty spectators, Baudrillard's conception of the commodification of meaning suggests that a simulacrum of change is all that is possible. The distinction may be a too easy one. Both Baudrillard and Debord arguably have abiding interests in how the mutation of society allows for different forms of (albeit limited) intervention by the spectator. Both Debord and Baudrillard suggest that the

commodification of space, the creation of a culture of commodity, indicates a temporal stasis. Time does not occur here, there can be little progression.

I maintain however, and perhaps it is only an act of faith, that the possibility of a concerted piece of resistance which strikes at the heart of forms of territorial politics must be maintained. At the very least, in the Derridean fashion, to be political is to act as if it was possible to be truly political. It is to resist the homogenisation of time and the potential defeatism therein. It is, in Derridean style, to be wary of the abiding *spectre* of the other, of an indescribable other, whose presence motivates a critical stance towards homogenisation and gives us a politics of the other. Derrida argues that it is the other who gives us time, it is the encounter with undetermined otherness, however this may be possible, that provides a Walter Benjamin-like disruption to the simple façade of spectacles which compress time and make the space for politics all but impossible to find (Benjamin, 1955/1999; Derrida, 1999). I argue however, that attention to the form of the spectacle, which I argue is language, and attempts to breach this form through conscious practices of writing and poetry which distort the organising elements of bounded space and linear time which lend coherence to descriptive language, can give us a fundamental space for politics which is situated in the idea of the indeterminacy of the other and the radical and scandalous disruption to smooth and facile collages of ‘politics’ and ‘ethics’. This is not to follow the lead set by the Situationist critique, where ‘appearance’ is diminished against an actual truth or reality. The possibility of critique and of resistance lies within the mere appearance of meaning, it is through the questioning of the genealogy and metaphysics of ‘truth’ and truth contests that the articulation of ‘mere appearance’ can become resistance.

In other words, some types of poetic language which detach notions of identity, community, responsibility and solidarity from a particular restrictive account of spatio-temporal relations, may form the fundamental space for a politics premised on, in Theodor Adorno’s words, “putting meaning on trial; [unfolding] its history” (Adorno, 1970/1997: 153). For Adorno, this may occur through putting “the I” (by which he means the aggregate of the culture industry) to question through certain aesthetic forms that cause one to “shudder” which “is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude”. I want to argue that the shaking up of the smooth façade of territorial conceptions of politics and ethics (and consequently of identity, community and responsibility) is undertaken by the poetic writing of Mohsen Soltanyand and Mehmet al Assad.

### **Spectacle and State Performance**

This section of the paper will try to show that the state’s discourses surrounding the spectacle of detention, and of protest within detention camps, constitute forms of interpretation which abbreviate notions of identity, community and responsibility in terms of the priority of a territorial view of the world. That is, the presentation of detention as a spectacle is a means of the state performing itself, performing and outlining its moral and political limits.

The argument that I am making here is premised on the idea of a territorial resolution of human affairs, where the range of human potentiality is thought within a fixed spatiality. In this fixed spatiality, the onus is on the marshalling of borders, it is a

spatial sovereignty of border anxiety. For it is the borders which lead to a well-defined and de-limited spatial community, it is borders that distinguish between a coherent internality and a potentially dangerous and incoherent externality. Thus the territorialisation of human life appears premised on an inside/outside dichotomy with the outside actively rendered coherent in part through an ethic of survival before the potential threat of an external danger.

This ethic of survival before a threat of external danger is terribly evident in contemporary Australia with its defence of the borders strategy before a perceived threat of unauthorised boat arrivals. The discourses surrounding detention are premised on this threat, they reassert a sense of dangerous alienness, creating a spectacle of irrational and indecent behaviour while simultaneously setting up and playing on a sense of a coherent, rational and decent Australia. This idea of a decent Australia is integral to the argument that those detainees protesting their detention are engaged in 'moral blackmail'. The sense of a decent Australia also thus serves to displace responsibility for violence. In entrenching a sense of the irrational repugnance of the asylum seeker, repugnant before the decent Australian collective, the state and its organs emphasise the dichotomy between a decent normal collective and a repugnant alien. The spectacle of detention is unthinkable and incoherent without its other, the normal and decent Australian collective.

There are thus three principle things that happen in the creation of the detention spectacle. First, it dehumanises asylum-seekers, leaving one with the mere image of asylum-seekers divorced from their humanity. Second, the performative creation of the spectacle of detention re-states the moral and political limits of Australia. Indeed the spectacle is premised on the distinguishing of a decent Australian norm that may be suitably shocked and outraged by protest at detention centres. Third, the spectacle of detention attempts to displace the structure of violence which leads to the absolving of Australia's responsibility for that violence. Through all of these an abiding sense of dichotomy and distance, the creation of moral as well as physical gulfs, is palpable in the discourse on asylum-seekers in detention. The dichotomous notions of community, identity and responsibility, strictly delimited and premised on the differentiation of 'an other', are repeated and re-emphasised in the spectacle and the discourses surrounding the spectacle.

The control of space, the holding of refugees incommunicado in strictly regulated spaces, is the basis for the monopolistic representation of the asylum-seeker. The closure of media channels to the asylum-seeker means that the norm is the exclusionary representation of asylum-seekers by the government. From this initial regulation of space comes a regulation of time. The history and experiences of asylum-seekers become so much fodder for state discourses, re-worded or invented histories become the basis for imagistic senses of their personality and character. The resonance of the spectacle, the capacity of the state to vacuum in diverse histories, means also that time is held in stasis. Rather than the differentiating and possibly disruptive experience of the other, we get a muted spectacle that is interested in securing the norm. What occurs then is the restriction of the space for the political. Given that the state has leeway to re-state the experience of the other, given that the state has more or less successfully confined refugees to highly regulated spaces where they are held incommunicado, how can one conceive of the political agency to resist?

The government's reporting of protest at the camps is incessant, it is continually being talked about, the imagery of lip-sewing and other forms of self-harm are brought up and re-emphasised. The Australian Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, uses the incidents of lip-sewing to emphasise the gulf between aliens and Australians:

Lip sewing is a practice unknown in our culture but we've seen it before amongst detainees and it's something that offends the sensitivities of Australians. They believe it will influence decisions. It can't and it won't (BBC News Online, 2002).

The displacement of violence here is important. The act of lip-sewing is important because it "offends the sensitivities of Australians". The neat displacement of victim and of violence is telling. The desperation of the 58 asylum seekers in Woomera who sewed their lips together in January 2002 as a means of protesting the length of time that their visa applications are taking is brushed out of the picture. A decent Australian community is what matters: lip-sewing offends their sensitivities (Pugliese, 2002).

Philip Ruddock has reacted to protests elsewhere in a similar manner.

... there are some people who do not accept the umpire's decision, and believe that inappropriate behaviour will influence people like you and me, who have certain values, who have certain views about human rights, who do believe in the sanctity of life, and are concerned when people say, "If you don't give me what I want, I'm going to cut my wrists ... I'm saying that there are some people who believe that they will influence decisions by behaving that way.

the difficult question for me is, "How do I respond?" Because I think if I respond by saying, "All you've got to do is slit your wrist, "even if it's a safety razor – " – which is what happens in most cases – "...you'll get what you want." ... you say it's desperation, I say that in many parts of the world, people believe that they get outcomes by behaving in that way. In part, it's cultural (cited by ABC, 2001).

Ruddock here emphasises again the alienness and indeed the depravity of people whose culture apparently includes the slitting of wrists. The structure of violence and the impeding of refugee voice, the muting of refugees, that leads to this sort of protest are occluded. Ruddock's logic instead belittles self harm ('even if it's a safety razor which is what happens in most cases') and in doing so render ever more faceless the asylum seekers. The levels of desperation and need that lead to violent protests of this sort are obscured. The histories and experiences of asylum seekers are written out in one swift stroke as the spectacle of images of people slitting their wrists to influence a decent Australia, people who do believe in the sanctity of life, is placed in their stead.

The social relation between asylum-seeker and normal Australia, a relation based on repugnance and fear, is being actively created here by Philip Ruddock. It is an irresponsible creation insofar as it is based not on any concerted engagement with the histories and experiences of asylum seekers but in a series of images which together constitute a spectacle where time is held in stasis. Australia is thus offered a spectacle of asylum-seekers divorced from reality and arising from the vested interests of the Australian state. This spectacle forms the basis of the relation between Australia and asylum seekers.

The sweeping up of time, of the past experiences and histories of asylum-seekers is an abiding aspect of asylum-seeker imagery. This approach seems to show a willingness to re-state the identity of asylum-seekers in order to cohere the Australian state. Thus the body of the asylum-seeker is *instrumentalised*. It becomes something to be used and exploited. Asylum-seeker identity, reduced to imagery and shorn of disrupting personal testimony, becomes fundamentally exploitable. It can be used to cohere an Australian state, to write the limits of Australia, and to win an election. The children overboard affair was perhaps, along with the *Tampa* affair, an integral vote-winner for John Howard's government in the 2001 Federal Election (Mares, 2002). During the run up to the election allegations that were later proved to be false, and there is a distinct possibility that enough senior ministers in the Howard government knew at the time that these reports were false, about boat people throwing their children overboard in order to "morally blackmail" Australia were repeated with fervour and much excitement. Howard declared on radio that boat people had thrown their children overboard and that this was 'a stunt' and 'an attempt to morally blackmail Australia.' (CNN.com, 2001)

Quite frankly, I don't want people in this country, people who are prepared – if those reports are true – to throw their own children overboard ... Genuine refugees don't put their own children at risk. They become refugees in the name of the preservation and safety of their children ... I don't accept it's a measure of desperation (cited by USCR, 2002: 31).

Howard draws the limits of Australian decency. He cannot stomach the idea of people who are willing to throw children overboard in Australia. Howard qualifies this: he notes that the statement may not be true, but then goes on to make a distinction between 'genuine refugees' who refuse to put their children at risk and others who are presumably not genuine. The concern about the truth of the story does not preclude the promotion of an image of asylum seekers as people with potentially dangerous inclinations towards their children (and perhaps, therefore, our own children).

The sense of an imagistic history of asylum seekers is increased by government reporting of asylum-seekers. We do not receive a personal history or an outline of experience. Rather we are confronted with events that take on the character of images in their isolation and detachment from historical, social or political context. As I have noted these images play on a sense of Australian decency, outlining the moral and political limits of Australia and displacing the humanity of the asylum-seeker by re-wording

protest as an affront to Australian decency. Another example worth highlighting is the creation of a discourse on the potential danger that the asylum-seeker poses, this is again through image-like speech that point to apparently terrorist-like activities of the asylum-seeker. Prime Minister Howard said in the weeks after September 11, “you don’t know who is coming and you don’t know whether they do have terrorist links or not...” (Mares, 2002). Mute(d) asylum seekers are tainted; you don’t know, they may all be terrorists.

The image-like speech is continued in a report by the Australian Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, or DIMIA (a catch-all ‘Ministry of the Other’ says Suvendrini Perera (Perera, 2002)), ‘Australia has recently experienced an influx of illegal boat arrivals, mainly from the Middle East. They are being transported to Australia by organised criminal gangs of people smugglers.’ (DIMIA, 2002). The creation of a symbolic collation of the meaning of asylum seekers is evident in DIMIA’s throwing up of images of people ‘from the Middle East’ and by definitively stating their link to ‘criminal gangs of people smugglers’. Asylum seekers journeying on a tortuous and terribly risky path to Australia are reduced to a series of abstracted nouns that, and probably not incidentally, carry great weight in post-September 11 and post-Bali Australia. The people are brushed out, the focus is emotive, drawing links to criminality and playing on fears of terrorism (‘from the Middle East’); the end result is dehumanising.

I have tried to make the argument that the asylum-seeker is *instrumentalised*. His or her identity is used to clarify Australian identity. The control and surveillance of boat people ensure that a monopolistic representation of them may be made by the state. These are representations that divorce from social and historical context; they are like free-floating images, bent to the whim of the government. What sort of asylum-seeker does the Australian nation-state require? This is Joseph Pugliese’s ‘Foucauldian question”. By placing the enquiry in these terms, Pugliese emphasises the disciplinary strategies that underlie the economies of representation which give us a particular asylum-seeker. Lying hid within this economy of representation is thus an interaction between the asylum-seeker and the nation-state. This is an interaction between the summarily occluded and the included. It is perhaps here in the utilising of the body of the asylum-seeker by the nation-state to cohere its own identity that the possibility of politics remains. Refining this further, the closure of space for politics and the promotion of spectacle and the consequent derogation of any substantive identity of the asylum seeker bring with it also the possibility of resistance. This possibility is read into and inherent in the image of dangerous asylum seekers require policing and control. The element of danger may be played on.

### **The Theatre of Detention as Resistance**

Foucault has argued that resistance is integral to all power relations if that relation is not to be simply between a person and a thing. The element of humanity allowable to refugees justifies the coercion and the use of force against asylum-seekers. Their potential danger must be a part of the image. In this danger there lies the possibility of resistance.

The spectacle of refugees is at once marginal and central. The space within which refugees are contained is on the one hand marginal insofar as it is subject to processes of

concealment, typified in the ban on media entrance, the ban on mobile phones, the difficulty of entrance for visitors. Detainees in Villawood Detention Camp, near Sydney, are placed in a high security wing, with people convicted of a criminal offence, if they are found to be in possession of a mobile phone or a camera.<sup>2</sup> The marginalisation occurs again within the centre itself. The new camp, Baxter in South Australia, about 500km from Adelaide, is arranged along lines that maximise the potential for surveillance and minimise interaction amongst detainees themselves. Detainees are kept in enclosures where windows look out onto a common yard. There are four or five self-contained enclosures, in order to see a friend in another enclosure you have to fill out a form and are then taken to a common area for a couple of hours. There is 24 hour surveillance, a check every hour on the hour.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 5: Baxter Immigration Detention Camp (pictured after fire December, 2002) (news.com.au, 2002)**

On the other hand, the space to which detainees are confined is central to the Australian political imagination and perhaps to the very constitution of Australian politics. The imagistic reporting of disturbance and of riots coupled with the imagistic reporting of the fearful identity of asylum-seekers ensures that the space of detention is central to Australia. It is this centrality and the danger within the spectacle that provides the possibility of resistance.

#### Violent resistance

Joseph Pugliese suggests that the symbolic act of sewing lips together brings to question the rational social contract which bounds Australia:

The act of suturing your lips stages the graphic disruption of the social contract as founded principally on an ethics of speech and dialogue: in the face of a regime that pays no heed to your pleas and petitions for refuge and asylum that juridically eviscerates your right to free speech, the withdrawal of language signals despair at the very possibility of ethical dialogue (Pugliese, 2002: para 18).

The act of sewing one's lips together highlights the limits of the rational civitas, it calls to attention the very grounds of this form of politics by starkly highlighting its limits. For Pugliese hence the sewing of lips can provide a critical spectacle, a series of images that question the onus to incarceration and violence within the rational civitas.



At the core of the violent protests, of lip sewing, of wrist cutting, of throwing oneself onto the razor wire, is an attempt to transgress the borders and limits of the camp. It is an attempt to transgress the not-Australia to which refugees have been confined, to make a claim for the interaction with the normal polity. It is also an attempt to demonstrate the limits of this polity, of the exclusions and violence which founds the borders of the norm. It is also to make a case thus for the inter-contamination of the norm with the aberrant, of the fundamentally political nature of the space that is outside of the ostensible borders of politics. It is to remind of the centrality of suffering and the instrumentalisation of suffering in the Australian polity.

Because resistance is written into the nation-state's collage of images of the refugee, the danger is that resistance may play into the hands of the nation-state: it may be enveloped within the ongoing spectacle. Yet I have already suggested that this overly pessimistic state of affairs depends on the capacity of the nation-state to control the consumer of the images. Rather I suggest that the possibility exists for the creation of other solidarities. The spectacle, Debord suggests, is both integrated and diffuse. The meanings of the spectacle are difficult to pin down. It is here in the possibility of the mutation of the spectacle that a form of resistance occurs.

This mutation is perhaps akin to the lip sewing and the demand for a new form of hospitality by the asylum-seeker. Yet in this reliance on the mutation of spaces we are perhaps engaged in a furtherance of the image over and above the real. We rely on the symbols and simulations of politics; what we have is "a useless play of signs" (Hussey, 2001: 68) with no fundamentals changing. Guy Debord in pessimistic fashion describes a "simulated international political landscape" in 1993:

Ubu is king again in Poland in the dynasty of Wales: the global coalition against Iraq and its devastating non-result; the Russian republics and the development of their civil wars with the democracy of prevaricators, under Yeltsin; the concentration camps of Serbia and the ethnic negotiations of Sarajevo that continue during extermination despite the courageous mediation of Europe; the humanity-media laughing in Mogadishu that was so laughable; the victory of the rightwing state against Escobar in Colombia, as well as the cleansing accomplished by 'deathsquads'; across the sub-continent the formal abolition of Apartheid and the massacres of blacks in South Africa; the Algeria they would like to pass off as Islam; the Italy of the 'clean hands' that finally established the proof of Andreotti's innocence. Everywhere speculation has, in the end, become the sovereign aspect of all property. Everywhere excess Simulation has exploded, and everywhere death spreads as fast and massively as disorder. Nothing works anymore, and nothing is believed (cited by Hussey, 2001: 68).

Debord's moralistic tone despairs of change, of fundamental change when resistance is based on the same simulation, the spectacle of symbolic politics. In the cross-wire

solidarities between asylum-seekers at Woomera and a loose collective of mainly youth groups, the sense of the simulation and the incapacity to go beyond symbol exists in the way ‘the Bakhtiari boys’ were treated. Alamdar and Montazar Bakhtiari are two boys who were spirited out of Woomera Detention Camp during protests outside the camp in early 2002. The two boys were held with their mother and three sisters once they arrived in Australia on the recommendation of an immigration officer who doubted their claim to be members of the Hazara ethnic group living in Afghanistan. Protestors who brought the boys to the British consulate at Melbourne appear to have been continuing to treat and use the detained boys symbolically. Their media-attended, grandly staged handover to the consulate continues the spectacular and dehumanised existence of asylum seekers in Australia. The welfare of the boys seemed secondary; their handover to a country with asylum regulations at least as strict as Australia’s appeared to be a symbolic act and no more. The boys were almost immediately returned to the Australian authorities and were back in camp when the British Foreign Minister refused to allow their claims for refugee status to be considered.

### Poetry and Resistance

I have tried to argue for the possibility of a resistance that reminds of the humanity lying hid within the camps; and lying hid because of the stated and spectacled limits of the moral and political body that is ‘Australia’. I have suggested that there is a danger in the symbolic politics of violence in that the spectacle merely continues. I suggest that these forms of protest do not strike at the core, the form of politics.

I suggest that perhaps it is possible to conceive of striking at the form of politics through poetry. The poet uses language and forms that potentially strike at conceptions of bounded space and linear time which underlie the territorialisation of human life and consequently of the forms of dichotomous politics and ethics that ensue therefrom. I argue that critiques of territorial forms of existence may be put forward by forms of writing that emphasise the possibility of different forms of existence and of solidarity. Poetry here is seen as an attempt to specifically put forms of meaning on trial, to articulate the genealogy and etymology of meaning.

The basis of this approach is a sense that language and social life are intrinsically linked. How the world is explained is dependent on a series of vested interests and power relations that give us particular meanings while obscuring or occluding others. Roland Bleiker:

... language and social life are intrinsically linked ... more inclusive ways of theorising and conducting world politics may emerge from engaging the linguistic habits through which some of our most pressing dilemmas have become objectified ... Poetry is ideally suited for rethinking world politics because it revolves around a recognition that (aesthetic) form and (political substance) cannot be separated. The manner in which a text is written, a speech is uttered, a thought is thought, is integral to its content. There is no neutral way of representing the world, a form that is somehow detached from the linguistic and social practices in which the speaker or writer is embedded (Bleiker, 2000: 271).

Mehmet al Assad, a detained asylum seeker, writes in a poem entitled 'Asylum'.

Will you please observe through the wire  
I am sewing my feet together  
They have walked about as far  
as they ever need to go.

Will you further observe  
through the wire  
I am sewing my heart together  
It is now so full of  
the ashes of my days  
it will not hold any more

Through the wire  
one last time  
please observe  
I am sewing my lips together  
that which you are denying us  
we should never have  
had to ask for (al Assad, 2002).

For al Assad, asylum is about observances, about spectacles. He is deeply aware of the spectacle of protest, calling on the consumer of the spectacle to observe ever more closely. His is a play on spectacle that simultaneously calls for the continuation of the spectacle of protest while at the same time allying it with a deepening question of the meaning of 'asylum'.

The tenuousness of the meaning of asylum is the ostensible subject of the poem. Al Assad emphasises the contested meanings and experiences of asylum. His poem is to be couched within Ruddock's pre-emptive description of protestors at Woomera as rejectees:

I see a lot of comments from time to time, particularly from those who are perhaps not dealing with these issues all the time, that these are refugees or asylum seekers. They are nothing of the sort . . . to use a term that is perhaps apt, they are a rejectee (cited by Morris, 2002).

Mehmet is bringing into question the right of the Immigration Minister to pre-emptively reject a responsibility for asylum. Detainees at Woomera and elsewhere in Australia are experiencing other forms of asylum outside of the legally codified version. Mehmet emphasises the subjectivity of the term. His is an Australian asylum of confinement, sewing my feet together, despair, sewing my heart together, and a denial of what I never should have had to ask for. The last stanza repeats and emphasises the humanity of

asylum-seekers. That they should never have had to ask for asylum, that it should have been the norm. Here Mehmet appears to call into question the territorialisation of life, the territorialisation of what it is to be human, the creation of a no longer human entrapped in a place where fundamental rights of a human being is denied.

Mohsen Soltanyzand, a recently released asylum seeker spent four years in detention in Port Hedland and in Villawood. One of his poems entitled, 'Sunset', describes Port Hedland detention camp:

The sun sits on the horizon,  
warm & ancient.

Coming close to darkness it projects a bold shade of red.

For the heart of the world, a beautiful view.  
Some people are passionate.  
Others are narrow-minded and close their eyes  
To the law of life.

The red shade is a message, a gift to the people,  
The world becoming dark.  
Night is rising and the day is finished.

Night brings mourning to the sunset.  
The tears of the night are the stars in the sky.  
Flickering, crying for the day.

Some nights there is moonlight for the morning.  
Some days the bright sun can be hidden by cloud.  
Sometimes the sky cries raindrops, sometimes blood.

A falling star, a meteor can clean the face of the sky.  
Wiping away the tears.

When the sky is upset and cries the wind is its comfort.  
Sometimes light in the moon, light in the sky, makes the light of love.  
When the sky is upset in its heart dew spreads on the ground in the morning.

If I go into the sunset I have no sky.  
I have no moon or clouds for crying.  
Nor wind to make me comfortable.  
I have no falling star or meteor.  
I sleep on the ground with more and more soil on top of me.

All alone.

Animals may have a party feasting on my body.

If I make a party for animals.

Then I am alive with myself (Mohsen, 2003)

In this remarkable poem, Mohsen plays on the stunning imagery of the sunset over the ocean that greets residents at Port Hedland detention camp. In an interchange between abiding laws of nature and the ignorance of the laws of life, Mohsen describes despair at the heart of the detention camp. He imagines drops of blood, the beauty of the sky at night, yet the sadness, stars crying for the light of day. Yet in the mourning of the sky for the day, the wind, stars and meteors bring comfort. For Mohsen there is no comfort. There is the threat of death, the promise of death, the act of burial, lying into the ground becoming one with nature. For Mohsen the asylum camp separates him from nature, there is alienation from nature itself. For Mohsen, his way of being alive is in making a party for animals, for overriding the distance and alienation of the asylum seeker, alienated not only from the polity but from nature itself; from, that is, the capacity to be, to live, to have an existence. All these are foreclosed, are overdetermined, by different techniques of enclosure and surveillance. Mohsen's allegorical and imagistic writing highlights an alienation from nature itself. The camp is effectively a 'zone of indistinction' where a depoliticised form of life is confined, excluded from the polity but in this exclusion appropriated into the polity. Giorgio Agamben writes that the *homo sacer*, the bare life placed outside of the bounds of the polity, the remainder or by-product of the constitution of politicised life, is subject to a double exclusion. The *homo sacer* is 'sacred man', a term of Roman law, who may be killed with impunity but not sacrificed. Thus *homo sacer* was subject to a double exception in the sense that he was exempt from both the sphere of the profane and the sphere of the religious. The *homo sacer* is a limit concept, it marks the extent and range of the juridical, ethical and political structure of the sovereign state. In marking this, the *homo sacer* thus serves from its condition of exemption to outline and guarantee the norm; the exception to the rule founds and maintains the rule. Bare life is not therefore cast out freely; Agamben and Foucault both maintain that the defining characteristic of modern sovereignty is its erasure of the distinction between natural and politicised life. Natural life becomes the appropriated into the norm by its very exception: "the living being ... dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, *within it*." (Agamben, 1998: 8; my emphasis). The originary exclusion at the core of the modern polity, distinguishes thus a zone of indistinction, neither wholly inside nor outside the polity. Soltanyand's detention is one that alienates him from nature, from "the very law of life". Exempt from politicised life, the asylum seeker as *homo sacer* is prevented from living natural life. Soltanyand's poetry conveys the multiple realities of detention through an imagistic language that at first reading appears to have little political weight or purpose. Yet the very political force of this particular poem is in its inhabiting of the margins of language (Bleiker, 1999). The political force of the poem comes from its almost meditative engagement with detention in the description of the beauty of nature within the camp and the transformation of red sunsets to visions of blood.

This poem by Mohsen and perhaps all of his recently published ones, write of alienation and despair with an overriding intent to communicate and seek a relation with otherness that would simultaneously vivify himself. By making ‘a party for animals’, Mohsen becomes alive, in death and in his literal consumption by animals, Mohsen feels alive, at one and in an embrace with an otherness, and with existence itself, so stringently denied him. In contrast to al-Assad’s vibrantly political demand, Mohsen’s protest is a disquieting quiet, a virtual meditation on alienation and remembrance. While al-Assad’s poetry is clearly and specifically addressed, Soltanyzand’s poetry is cast out without addressee. Yet it is this casting out, without addressee, without concrete political message, without clear solidarity, that maintains the political force of the poem. The camp in Soltanyzand’s eyes becomes a riot of colours, the celebration of sunset, so spectacular in the skies, brings on the onset of night, of the despair of the camp. Soltanyzand’s poetic language brings home the meaning of the camp in ways that explicit description cannot. The spatial confinement of people is expressed in terms of alienation from nature, from the law of life.

The image of death, and the release brought by death, by the literal consumption of the self by the other who eats him, is repeated in another poem by Mohsen, ‘Destiny’. And here, more explicitly than in the earlier poem, the release of death is an act of resistance.

Destiny, I am looking for you.  
 In the nights, in the sky  
 all day I follow you.  
 Where are you, in past memories or in the future?

Destiny, where are you?  
 I want to find you  
 I want to end your brutality

Hey, destiny, I will find you  
 I will face your brutality  
 With all my might  
 This word may be your last,  
 For know this, destiny  
 I can mark a full stop to your sentence

I could kill you  
 And will,  
 When I die.

Mohsen here in writing about the desire to end ‘destiny’, to end his incarceration, speaks about the stasis of time. Where is the destiny, in past memories or in the future? What is there but the mediation between the past, which is gone, and the future, which may never come? Has destiny left him in this enclosed camp where time does not pass? Has destiny passed him by in the past? Is it the future, which is changeless and in stasis in the

camp? Resistance comes with death, but this promise of death is strangely liberating. In the last two stanzas Soltanyzand writes belligerently and with a powerful voice, the knowledge that power can never be complete, that resistance is always possible even if it is only in the sense of taking his own life, is empowering. There remains in the midst of a seemingly total and finished appropriation of the life and histories of asylum seekers an empowering and vivifying reminder that subjugation can never be complete.

### **Ending**

The very spectacular forms of existence to which the asylum seeker is confined in Australia provides the basis from which a reading of the etymological and genealogical roots of meaning may be undertaken. This reading is in the form of poetic writing that through poetic imagery outline the multiple realities of 'detention' and of 'asylum-seeker'. Poetic writing, that by Mehmet al-Assad and Mohsen Soltanyzand, refract ways of being and the multiple meanings of the detention experience that conceptual language cannot encompass. The critique is hence discursive, it demonstrates that the discursive representation of asylum seekers, underlying the imagery of absconding deviants perpetrated by the Australian state, depends on an exclusion or occlusion of other meanings, of other ways of representing the asylum seeker and detention.

Poetic writing here has the capacity to highlight voices of asylum-seekers silenced under the dictates of the territorial resolution of human life. Poetry can be a means, as al Assad and Soltanyzand show, of resisting the conceptual public language into which asylum seekers' experience are coded. In this sense, the commodified image of asylum-seekers, to be used to cohere an Australian polity and to sell chicken or computer games, is subverted. It becomes increasingly difficult to contain the meaning of asylum and of detention once poetic language highlights their multiple realities. Such language disrupts the spatio-temporal resolutions of what it is to be human underlying the logic of territorial sovereignty and the originary exclusion of bare life at its core.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Personal history related to me by a detainee at Villawood. He was placed in the high-security annex of the camp for two months because a routine search of his quarters uncovered a mobile phone and a camera.

<sup>3</sup> Entering the camp one goes through heavy metal doors that are computer controlled. Visitors go through a metal detector and all gifts to detainees are x-rayed. No items of any sort may be brought into the camp, other than the clothes you are wearing. The guards are especially on the look out for recording or transcribing materials, including pen and paper. Visits are held in a heavily air-conditioned bare container-like structure (such as the type often found on construction sites). A visitor has a security guard with him at all times (though at a more or less unobtrusive distance) and another security guard observes the area from behind a glass panel at one end of the room.