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What is a Camp...?

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*What is a camp, what is its juridico-political
structure, that such events could take place there?*

Giorgio Agamben

*Among the innocent victims of the 9/11 terror attacks are several thousand asylum seekers in the
west, non-combatants painfully caught at the point where the 'war on terrorism' meets the 'war at
home'. Indeed, more than a point of intersection, the bodies of asylum seekers and refugees are the
very media through which the 'war on terror' is normalised into 'the war at home': through the new
forms of control and power it seeks to exercise over the bodies of asylum seekers, the war abroad
becomes the war at home.*

*Sanctioned and nourished by the fervour of war, heightened forms of surveillance at the border
combine with new powers of monitoring and policing within. The hunt for hidden enemies in our
midst imparts new zeal to the racialisation, criminalisation and targeting of suspect groups. Old and
current racisms couple in new combinations, and domestic agendas mesh with transnational ones.
The boundaries of national belonging and citizenhood are reconfigured through initiatives like the
'Patriot Acts' in the Unites States, the White Paper on citizenship in the U.K, new anti-asylum
seeker policies throughout the European Union and ever-expanding measures for 'Border
Protection' in Australia. Denationalisation and deterritorialisation are the key technologies in the
new consolidation of national limits.*

*This essay, part of a longer project on citizenship post 9/11, focuses on deterritorialisation in
Australia and maps its networks of relations in time and space -- its scattered genealogies,
geopolitical configurations and current political meanings. The essay is inspired by Giorgio
Agamben's theorisations of the camp in western modernity. It is structured as a series of extended
riffs prompted by his writings.*

A place that is...not Australia

1. 'Woomera Detention Centre' is an image of another world: a landscape of the known, yet
chillingly alien. In this photograph the postcard familiarity of the Australian desert - dust,
sand, open horizons, empty skies - is both affirmed and overturned. The outback as prison
is confined, sequestered, uncannily ordered space; but still vacant of life, extraterrestrial in
its emptiness. The photograph shows a place that is, and yet is not, Australia.

2. In *'Woomera Detention Centre* Annette McGuire realises visually a place Bernard Cohen
described in 1992, when asylum seekers first became subject to compulsory, indefinite
detention on our shores: *There are foreign people in Australia thinking foreign thoughts.
Some are locked up in Villawood, at the detention centre. Some are restrained in Perth. In
those places, you see, they are not really in Australia. They are in the empty ungoverned
space of their bodies, I guess, confined within not-Australia.*

3. Not-Australia is a place of strange oxymorons and uncanny repetitions. Here, space
confines and vastness isolates. The desert and the ocean alike become prisons. More than
two hundred years after the convict ships the Pacific is again imagined as penal zone. In
the centenary year of Federation Fortress Australia stages a victorious return. 'Border
Protection' becomes (again) the order of the day.

4. In *not-Australia* Australia's history reappears in unfamiliar yet still recognisable guises.
Indigenous Australians remember other internment camps from the not-too-distant past:
children's dormitories encased in chicken wire; grids of regulation housing cutting through
complex interweavings of kin, language and place.

5. Echoing the Dickensian hulks of imperial times, the government considers hiring large
ships as holding pens for asylum seekers. *Not-Australia* too has its aspirations to empire. It
expands from the mainland camps to swallow Christmas Island, the Cocos Islands and
Ashmore Reef: by an act of legislation asylum seekers who arrive here will be deemed not
to have arrived. They find themselves nowhere but in not-Australia. Outside our national
borders not-Australia establishes neo-colonial outposts on Nauru and Papua New Guinea;
it attempts forays into a Fijian former leper colony, to an uninhabited island of Kiribati, into
East Timor, Tuvalu, Palau... This initiative is termed, apparently without an ear for

inauspicious resonances, the Pacific Solution.

6. The inmates of not-Australia are, in official phraseology, unlawful non-citizens. They are Not-Australian and unAustralian; the stuff of contraband: traffic, illegals, human cargo. Non-people. In Tony Birch's phrase, they are unpeopled: the ones whose human suffering may not be seen or recognised.

7. Woomera Detention Centre reveals a site where people are not to be seen. What remains to be seen is the camp. The camp, unpeopled, as a location that speaks in time and space.

Scattered Genealogies

I. THE EUROPEAN CAMP

8. In a series of far-reaching essays throughout the 1990s Giorgio Agamben theorises the emergence of the camp in Western modernity, identifying it as both 'the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West' (1998:181) and 'an event which decisively signals the political space of modernity itself' (1997:113). In Agamben's thinking the concentration camp is constitutive of contemporary life in the west. Examining the juridical and political structure of the camp 'will lead us to regard the camp, not as an historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past ... but in some way as the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living' (1997: 106).

9. In a key essay, 'The camp as nomos of the modern' , Agamben locates the origins of the twentieth-century European concentration camp in Spanish campos de concentraciones in Cuba and British camps for Afrikaner prisoners in the Boer War. In this genealogy the initial characteristics of the camp are colonial war, with an implicit racial/ethnic difference in the interned population, and the invocation of a 'state of exception' based on considerations of 'national security' rather than criminal behaviour on the part of those imprisoned. The camp claims its justification in this concern for 'national security', a concern that allowed the first German camps to be founded not by the Nazi regime, but by a Social-Democratic government declaring 'a state of siege or of exception and a corresponding suspension of the articles of the German constitution that guaranteed personal liberties' (1997: 107).

> The birth of the camp in our time appears as an event which decisively signals the political space of modernity itself. It is produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state (which was founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation) enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its proper tasks. If the structure of the nation-state is, in other words, defined by the three elements of land, order, birth, the rupture of the old nomos is produced ... in the point marking the inscription of bare life (the birth which thus becomes nation) within two of them. Something can no longer function within the traditional mechanisms that regulated this inscription, and the camp is the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order - or rather the sign of the system's inability to function without being transformed into a lethal machine.
>
> **Agamben 1997: 113-4**

10. Anxiety over 'national security' in turn justifies the formalisation of the camp: 'The importance of this constitutive nexus between the state of exception and the concentration camp cannot be overestimated.... The camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule. In the camp, the state of exception ... is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order' (1997:108). The camp as exceptional space is both inside and outside the nation: it is excluded from and at the same time included in the space of the national by its inscription within the very juridical and political structures that decree its exclusion.

> The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp which we must learn to recognise in all its metamorphoses into the zones d'attentes of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities. The camp is the fourth inseparable element which has now added itself to - and so broken - the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land.
>
> **Agamben 1997: 113-4**

11. The camp's inhabitants are those deemed to have no claim on the nation but, paradoxically, are brought even more firmly under its control by virtue of their exclusion from its laws. The space of the camp is thus a 'zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective rights and juridical protection no longer made any sense' (1997: 110). In this hybrid space of exception, a hitherto unperceived gap between the categories of 'the human' and 'the citizen' is exposed in the figure of the denationalised citizen, such as the Jewish or Gipsy outcast of the Third Reich, or the stateless refugee. Such figures, 'growing sections of

humankind [who] are no longer representable inside the nation- state' (2000: 201) in fact embody the crisis of that formation. The refugee or 'stateless' figure represents that which cannot be contained within the nation-state because of anxieties over 'national security', and is therefore relegated to a new space, 'the camp', within state boundaries, and yet outside. The camp thus appears as a 'space of exception' within and without national space:

> It is significant that the camps appear together with new laws on citizenship and the denationalization of citizens (not only the Nuremberg laws on citizenship in the Reich, but also the laws on denationalization promulgated by almost all European states ... between 1915 and 1933). The state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of order, now becomes a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by the bare life that can no longer be inscribed in that order. The growing dissociation of birth (bare life) and the nation-state is the new fact of politics in our day and what we call camp is this disjunction. To an order without localization (the state of exception, in which law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very centre a dislocating localization which exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken. (Agamben 1997: 113-4).

12. The structure of the camp as a 'dislocating localization' that exceeds the political system of the state is a space where the 'national' is placed in suspension: not-Australia. This space of the camp, where the category of 'citizen' is no longer operative, also is the space where the claims and limits of the 'human', what remains as a residue of the 'citizen', are tested and revealed in lethal form. The figure of the refugee or 'stateless' individual exposes the purchase of 'the human' and its rights once divested of the rights it bears as a citizen.

13. This limited purchase of 'human rights' beyond citizen's rights is exposed today in the new category of stateless person revealed to the world at Camp X-Ray: the shackled, gagged, ear-muffed and blindfolded figure of 'the battlefield detainee' on its knees before heavily armed guards. In Camp X-Ray the camp as space of exception achieves a new global dimension in the post-September 11 world. This U.S military base at Guantanomo Bay, Cuba, a symbol of the unfinished business of an older war, is a dislocating localization par excellence as the holding place for those prisoners of the war in Afghanistan who are deemed somehow not to be prisoners of war.

14. In this space of exception captured soldiers of the war in Afghanistan, including the Australian citizens David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, are placed outside the protection of the 1949 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, the guarantees of U.S domestic law or that of their own countries (Robertson). While any U.S nationals who fought on the wrong side are removed to the U.S mainland where their prerogatives of citizenship are upheld, the citizens of other states are effectively denationalised. An image of the 'human rights' that remain to these stateless prisoners is powerfully visualised in their exposed chain-link pens more reminiscent of cages than cells. A new category, 'the battlefield detainee' comes into being, normalising Camp X-Ray as a global space of exception outside either national or international law.

15. This construct of the 'battlefield detainee' is characteristic of a war of category confusions and bizarre doublings: a war where soldier, terrorist and refugee can be made indistinguishable, where victims fleeing Taliban oppression can be constructed as potential 'sleepers' for its terror, where international conventions fail to protect asylum-seekers from being criminalised as 'illegal'; a war where cluster bombs and food parcels share similar packaging; where loyal, long-term residents are denuded overnight of rights by the quaintly named 'USA-PATRIOT Act', and secret trials, forced interrogations and summary executions are re-imaged as no longer the instruments of tyranny but the prerogatives of Enduring Freedom.

II. THE AUSTRALIAN CAMP

We have for too long been regarded as dispossessed in our own
land, aliens in our own land, 'citizens without rights' in our own land.

Tony Birch

16. How is Agamben's genealogy of the European camp as a space of exception and denationalisation inflected or reshaped by specific histories of colonial dispossession? What is the role of the camp in an Australia that was itself conceived as a permanent holding pen for those excised from citizenship in the body of the British nation?

17. The imperial fantasy of a gulag continent where Britain's criminal classes could be permanently despatched depends in turn on the institution of a different kind of camp: an internment camp for the population they displaced. Tony Birch has discussed how, after the foundational period of colonisation, the establishment of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in 1860 marked a period when the dispossessed Aboriginal was reconfigured as 'a landless and homeless refugee' (17). The Australian camp where denationalised Indigenous people were held in the second stage of colonisation is an institution that combines the functions of the colonial war camps or campos de concentraciones with the

lethal ends of the classic European camp. In Alexis Wright's novel *Plains of Promise* the character Elliott reflects on the Australian camp:

It was like a war, an undeclared war. A war with no name. And the Aboriginal man was put into their prison camps, like prisoners in the two world wars. But nobody called it a war: it was simply the situation, that's all. Protection. Assimilation ... different words amounting to annihilation. The whiteman wanted to pay alright for taking the lot. But they didn't want to pay for the blackman's culture, the way he thinks. Nor for the black man's language dying away because it was no longer tied to his traditional country.... The white people wanted everyone to become white and they were willing to pay out something for that, even though they believed what happened was not worth much.... Yet no one could change the law - so Elliott muttered to himself as he crossed the whiteman's roads ... nothing could change the essence of the land.... Elliott visualised the hands of white people writhing with some kind of illogical intent to misuse and swallow up what was not on a map imprinted in the ancestry of their blood. (75)

18. Australian colonisation's attempt to effect a rupture in the indivisible Indigenous category of blood/law/land, of country, that 'map imprinted in the ancestry of their blood', is accomplished by dislocating the native from the citizen. Through the mechanism of the camp the native becomes that which is, by definition, set apart from the citizen. If the European camp signals modernity's rupturing of a trinity of state, land and nation, and the disjunction between birth and nationality, the human and the citizen, the colonial Australian camp marks a yet further rupture by producing a third category, the native, to signify something other than both the citizen and the human.

19. The Australian camp is the site where the prisoner-of-war camp meets the long-term aims of colonial assimilation/annihilation in the forms of the outstation, the penal camp and the mission. This Australian camp takes varied forms, beginning with Tru-ger-nan-ner and the Bruny Islanders at Wybalena and moving across the spectrum of places where Indigenous peoples have been removed from their country and confined: from penal stations like Palm Island and mission stations like Cherbourg in Queensland and Framlingham in Victoria to Cootamundra and Sister Kate's, those 'homes' for stolen children. The characteristics of the Australian camp include unpaid labour by children and adults and control over domestic and sexual life (for example, the regulation of marriages according to degrees of 'caste' and colour), as well as the genocidal forms of reeducation aimed at eliminating the Aboriginality of their inmates (HREOC, Kidd).

20. Although it refers to U.S histories, Angela Davis's framework for a 'racialised genealogy of the prison' provides a further model for thinking the Australian camp. Proposing a 'genealogy of imprisonment that would differ significantly from Foucault's', Davis (1998: 97) calls for an understanding of imprisonment that can recognise and 'accentuate the links between confinement, punishment and race' :

At least four systems of incarceration could be identified: the reservation system, slavery, the mission system, and the internment camps of World War II. Within the U.S incarceration has thus played a pivotal role in the histories of Native Americans and people of African, Mexican and Asian descent. In all these places people were involuntarily confined and punished for no other reason than their race or ethnicity. (1998: 97)

21. Davis's framework enables a new understanding and linkage of the sites of enforced exclusion for nonwhite or non-Anglo as well as Indigenous populations in Australian history. For non-Indigenous, nonwhite people in Australia these include forms of segregation, immigration control and internment, from the quarantine stations and so-called Japtowns and Chinatowns throughout the country in the 1900s to the internment camps of World War 2. Forms of racialised confinement and separation combined with the denationalisation and deterritorialisation of certain racialised subjects link immigration policy and the domestic programs imposed on Indigenous people. Through these links both the native and the alien are produced as populations needing to be contained within the spaces of the camp and located outside the limits of the Australian nation.

22. At the same time, racialised segregation, institutionalisation and deportation were complementary means employed to prevent the possibility of lasting alliances between the native and alien. Records from multiethnic regions such as Broome or Darwin reveal how different forms of racialised and gendered punishment colluded with one another to organise and police relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, nonwhite populations, simultaneously excluding both groups from citizenship. Immigration by nonwhite women was restricted. Marriages between 'coloured alien' males and Indigenous women were prohibited, while 'cohabitation' was punished with deportation of the male partner, with any children of the unions characterised as 'non-natives at law' and removed from their mothers to be placed in institutions for 'half-castes' (Yu). These histories underline the structural role played by the camp in both immigration control and the control and surveillance of Indigenous peoples.

23. Although the bulk of her essay focuses on the specificities of slavery as a form of racialised punishment, Davis provides an invaluable conceptual frame for pursuing intersections between the colonial camp (the reservation or mission system), the internment camp (for prisoners of war or perceived enemy and alien populations within the nation) and the prison. While Foucault's European model of imprisonment was primarily 'based on a construction of the individual that did not apply to people excluded from

citizenship by virtue of their race' and therefore considered unworthy of 'the moral re-education that was the announced goal of the penitentiary', Davis points out that Foucault elsewhere recognises the role played by the prison 'to concentrate and eliminate politically dissident and racialized populations' (Davis 1998: 97-98). In this light the Australian camp for Indigenous peoples, in its manifestations as mission, outstation or penal settlement, can be understood as a hybrid site that combines a number of functions of the camp and the prison, aimed at 'concentrating and eliminating' Indigenous populations through assimilation and 'correction' as well as through enforced labor, confinement and physical punishment.

24. This intersection of camp and prison is the point at which racialised populations become subjected to processes of criminalisation. To quote from Chris Cunneen's (2000: 10) study of the policing of Indigenous communities, 'Criminalisation is a key part of the building of the nation and the nation-state through processes of exclusion' .

25. Consolidating a vision of national morality or building a consensus of 'national values' are processes linked to the generation of moral panics around particular groups and the projection of an aura of criminality and danger upon certain minoritised populations. Historically in Australia racialised criminalisation extends both to Indigenous people, whose legitimacy and claims to the land are thus written over, and to migrant and refugee populations who disturb the coloniser's sense of self. Themes of crime and contamination, of migrants and asylum seekers as potential corrupters of morals, carriers of disease and 'sleepers' for terror against whom fortress-like barriers must be erected, resonate deeply with the historical anxieties of the white Australia policy.

26. In the case of Indigenous people, Cunneen writes:

Criminalisation excludes and isolates Indigenous people from the assumed national consensus, and undermines both citizenship rights and Indigenous rights. Criminalisation legitimates excessive policing, the use of state violence, the loss of liberty and diminished social and economic participation. Criminalisation also permits an historical and political amnesia in relation to prior ownership of the land, contemporary land rights and Indigenous self-determination. The political rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Indigenous peoples are easily transformed into seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a 'law and order' threat to national unity. (2000: 10)

27. Positioning Indigenous people as a 'law and order threat to national unity' makes it possible to recast politicised opposition and resistance against colonisation as forms of persistent, perhaps inherent, criminality. Cunneen reveals the intimate structural and institutional links between the 'processes of colonisation and criminalisation, and in particular the role of the police in that process' (2000: 3), tracing the historical function of the police who played a military role in suppressing Indigenous resistance to colonisation, as well as acting as custodians with power over every aspect of Indigenous Peoples' lives. These histories underlie Indigenous understandings of institutionalisation as a continuum - for example, in the continuities between the places where stolen generations were confined and contemporary forms of detention and institutionalisation for young Indigenous people. Racialised punishment in Australia, then, historically combines the roles of camp and prison authorised by specifically targeted forms of criminalisation and anxieties over 'national security'.

III. THE IMMIGRATION IMPRISONMENT CAMP

[We are] not refugees here; we are prisoners in this country,
being bashed up and beaten.

Detainee at Curtin camp, Quoted in Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Report on Immigration Detention Centres* **(2001: 104)**

We are not paying for what we have done. We are paying for what we are.
I think we came to a very racist country.

Dr Ameer Sultan, Detainee at Villawood, *Los Angeles Times,* **5 January 2002**

28. In a 1998 essay, 'Refugees in a Carceral Age', Jonathan Simon proposes the term 'immigration imprisonment' to describe the incarceration of refugees in the U.S in the 1980s and 1990s. Simon deliberately substitutes imprisonment for the official term *detention* 'since the entire approach of [his] essay is to doubt the meaningfulness of this distinction' (1998: 578). Nonetheless, he concludes that sites such as the Krome Avenue Detention Center in South Florida, the prototype for later U.S detention centres, represent 'an important *mutation* of imprisonment as a modern technology of power' (1998: 599, my emphasis). Here, while Enlightenment notions of the prison as a site for reformation and the production of future democratic citizens cannot be entirely discarded, 'in practice ... the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] immigration imprisonment campaign invokes the earlier tradition of monarchical use of imprisonment as a site for enforcing undemocratic and unaccountable political orders' and 'belongs to a facet of governmental power largely unconstrained by the precedents of twentieth-century constitutional law' (1998: 600, 585).

29. Simon locates the beginnings of this 'mutation' of imprisonment in the wake of Mariel boatlift, and the massive exodus of Cuban and, later, Haitian refugees to Miami in the

1980s and early 1990s. Unlike the anticommunist, mostly affluent Euro-Caribbean arrivals from Cuba in the early years of the cold war, the Marielitos were largely dark-skinned, poor, unskilled and quickly categorised as the discharge of Castro's jails and asylums. Arrivals from Haiti were racialised to an even greater extent, stigmatised as carriers of AIDS, a disease associated with the worst fears of the 1980s. Haitian boats were at first intercepted and turned back by the U.S coastguard. Later, in response to international protests over violations of the *non-refoulement* clause of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Haitians were first interned in camps outside the reaches of U.S law at Guantanomo Bay, that recurring place of imprisonment for the denationalised internee, and then sent to Krome detention center on the U.S mainland.

30. The decision to incarcerate these particular asylum seekers, Simon reveals, drew on interlocking factors that positioned them as politically undesirable, racially and morally dangerous and economically unproductive in a Reaganite environment that promoted linked fears about race, crime, drugs, morality and welfare dependency. The imprisonment of this racialised group of refugees complemented the increasing role of domestic incarceration where '[b]roadly speaking, incarceration seems to be taking up the slack of governance left by the global redistribution of the manufacturing economy which has left whole communities to be organized by crime, law enforcement, and welfare' (1998: 603).

31. In this sense, '[w]hile immigration imprisonment appears to ... reemphasize the power of the nation-state, its deployment is more reflective of a new hybrid politics of local and transnational forces' . The displacement of populations impoverished by globalization meshes with a first world response through the 'form and function of imprisonment [that] further emphasize the features that the emerging global society treats as virtues' (Simon 1998: 602-3). Hence the increasing presence of low-cost prisons and detention centres managed by private operators in sites converted mostly from military uses, and located in remote regions where they provide new employment for disaffected local populations.

32. In Simon's analysis the U.S incarceration of refugee and asylum seekers in this period feeds and is fed by intertwined anxieties around race, criminality and national security, and combines the specific demands of a globalised economy with a form of imprisonment that harks back to absolutist prerogatives. In this model, the rhetoric directed at its criminalised inmates is punitive rather than reformatory or penitential. This mutation of monarchical, national and transnational elements simultaneously complements the role of domestic imprisonment, targeting populations already over-represented in the prison system while also promoting and responding to transnational flows.

33. The contemporary detention camp then can be understood as a mutant form of imprisonment that responds to the needs of the new strain of racism A. Sivanandan identifies as 'xeno-racism', a hybrid racism combining contemporary elements with all too familiar old ones: 'racism in substance, but "xeno" in form' (Fekete 2001: 1). The apparatus of xeno-racism operates throughout North America (Canada and the U.S), the European Union countries and Australia.

34. Liz Fekete has discussed the joint mobilisation and transnational cooperation of 'western security agencies, supranational global bodies, inter-governmental agencies and national governments' in producing a xeno-racist discourse that attempts to manage responses to refugees and asylum seekers:

The 'War Against Trafficking' serves, in effect, both as the means of and justification for states to recast asylum seekers in the public mind as 'illegal immigrants'. To break domestic immigration laws … is now redefined as a criminal act, even though the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees upholds the right of refugees to break domestic immigration laws in order to seek asylum. In such ways has the EU succeeded in shifting the terms of the asylum debate so as to treat asylum seekers not as people from many different countries, with many different experiences and each with an individual story to tell, but as a homogenous and undifferentiated mass. Hence, the fascination among its politicians and press with flat statistical projections of asylum flows; hence the offensive language in which migratory movements of displaced people are described in terms of environmental catastrophe; hence the dehumanisation of asylum seekers as a 'mass', 'horde', 'influx', 'swarm'. In this, xeno-racism against asylum seekers resonates with the past. Jews under Nazism, Blacks under slavery, 'Natives' under colonialism, were similarly dehumanised, held to hold mass characteristics which justified exploitation, victimisation and, in the last, genocide. (Fekete 2001: 6)

35. Fekete links xeno-racism with slavery and colonialism as well as Nazism, returning us to continuities Agamben identifies with the European concentration camp as 'the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and [whose] ... structure ... we must learn to recognise in all its metamorphoses' (1997: 113-4) in the new spaces of exception produced by xeno-racism.

Asylum, 2001

My name is asylum
I was born in here
Here is the detention centre

The centre is circled by wire
Wire makes it scaring

The wire is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
1 is the wire for closure
2 is the coiled barbed wire
3 is the protection for 1 and 2
4 is the razor wire on the top of 3
5 is the high fence

The higher fence
Which stops birds coming inside
Stops thoughts and imagination
Which stops the world outside
The higher fence which becomes
The border between me and Australia

© Angel Boujbiha
(from a poem sequence written while interned at the Villawood
detention camp, Sydney. Quoted with the kind permission of the author)

Camp Australia 2002

Where do the nuclear-tipped missiles rain down? Where is the
uranium mined, the toxic waste dumped, the missiles tested,
and where are those who flee interned?

www.woomera2002.com

36. *Not-Australia's* isolated detention camps cannot be disowned as anomalies in an otherwise healthy, democratic society, nor disconnected from a global system of xeno-racism. In multiple mappings in this essay they are situated through complex histories of racialised punishment and the prison-asylum complex enmeshed in a hybrid politics of local and transnational forces. In the political and juridical order of the nation, they constitute the 'materialization of the state of exception' that, in Agamben's words, places us 'virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created' (1997: 113).

> [I]f the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception...then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the crimes that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography. The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the Germans, the *Konzentrationslager fur Auslander* in Cottbus-Sielow in which the Weimar government gathered Jewish refugees from the East, or the *zones d' attente* in French International airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained will then all equally be camps. In all these cases an apparently innocuous space...actually delimits a space in which the normal order is *de facto* suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law, but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign.

> **Agamben 1997: 113**

37. Official Australian representations attempt to locate the camp in a different cluster of associations and meanings. In September 2000 a parliamentary committee concluded an inquiry into detention camps with a report bearing the ambiguous title *Not the Hilton.* This title encapsulates the equivocations that characterise official representations of the camps. On one level it reproduces the doublespeak of Immigration Minister Ruddock who frequently asserts that plenty of 'ordinary Australians' would be delighted to move into the facilities at Woomera or Port Hedland, while at the same time affirming, with chilling understatement, that these are neither five-star hotels nor places where people are sent for their own comfort or pleasure. At another level, the title invokes the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton' where U.S prisoners of war were held: a grim nod in the direction of the breakouts, hunger strikes, violence, psychosis and terror that characterise life in what former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser described as Australia's 'gulags'.

38. The hotel/prison/asylum allusions play on the distinctions between forced and voluntary sojourns, recalling the Immigration Minister Ruddock's favourite rejoinder to critics of mandatory detention: that asylum seekers are not being forcibly confined - they are free anytime to *go back where they came from* (Paddock 2002). These representations oscillate between the contradictory meanings encompassed by the word camp as a site designed for either pleasure or pain: the camps as innocuous and even desirable 'detention facilities' (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, ix), and the camps as necessary evils, places of 'deterrence', protective custody and deserved punishment where people must be locked up both for their own good and the protection of the community. These representations appeal to public support for law and order, fostering a sense of commonality across racial, ethnic and class boundaries and establishing a divide between the lives of decent Australians and the dangerous and alien illegals locked up on the other side of the razor wire.

39. It was not until about the end of 2000 that Australian detention camps, almost completely ignored except by a few former detainees and their supporters during the first

eight years of their existence, finally began to gain public visibility. This visibility was heightened as international media became alert to the links between Australian camps and a series of global events in the six-month period beginning with the Tampa stand off in August 2001 and leading up to the protracted hunger strikes at Woomera (and other Australian camps) in early 2002. Abroad, this period included the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S, Operation 'Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan and the establishment of Camp X-Ray at Guantanomo Bay, all events that inflected domestic policy decisions as well as perceptions of the detainees in Australian camps.

> Woomera is a remote town, 500 kms from Adelaide (Australia). It is also the centre of an economy of death, suffering and incarceration founded on the dispossession of indigenous lands. Our humanity is obliterated in Woomera, in the concentration camp, by missiles, by nuclear weapons, by toxic waste, by colonisation, by capitalism, by fear and division.

www.woomera2000.com

40. Since the mass protests there in early 2002, Woomera has received increasing levels of international coverage as the worst of Australia's camps (Ham 2002). Woomera, the location of the most sustained protests against the indefinite, indiscriminate and compulsory detention of asylum seekers, is also the place where resistance has met with the greatest violence. In August 2000 water canon were brought into use for the first time on this continent against the inmates of the Woomera camp (Hoffmann 2001: 28). In the months since, Woomera has been the scene of repeated breakouts, violence and, most recently, of protracted hunger strikes and extreme acts of protest, including mass lip-sewing. Perhaps the most telling image of this surge of protest is the action by Mahzer Ali, an Afghan asylum seeker who literally laid his body on the razor wire to draw attention to the plight of his nieces and nephews - aged from 5 to 13 years old - held in detention for over thirteen months (West 2002).

41. The concentration of violence at the Woomera camp is not accidental. Woomera can be located in a series of interlocking economies that link it to the global military and prison complex as well as to a long history of domestic dispossession and struggle at places such as the atomic test site at Maralinga and the Roxby Downs uranium mine. According to the activist website *woomera2000.com:*

The Woomera Prohibited Area is a vast military zone originally created for the testing of atomic bombs at Maralinga and Emu Field and testing of missiles to launch nuclear weapons. The US military spy-base Nurrungar was also situated here until its functions were moved to the CIA spy base at Pine Gap near Alice Springs in 1999. The rocket range continues to be used by the Australian airforce, navy and army, as well as other countries' military such as the US and Singapore, to test weapons. Military and aerospace companies are also using Woomera to develop weapons systems. The bombing of Afghanistan and the genocidal blockade of Iraq were given a helping hand by Woomera.

42. This history underpins the recent representations of the Woomera camp as akin to Camp X-Ray, suggesting a structural and ongoing rather than a merely superficial connection between these two zones of exception so thoroughly enmeshed with western military initiatives of the cold war and after.

43. Given its history as a U.S base until the late 1990s the town of Woomera provides an ideal setting for a detention camp, offering new sources of employment for a local community inured to secrecy and unlikely to have many prior links with the detainees or their histories. Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), a subsidiary of the U.S Wakenhut Corporation, replaces the U.S government as the town's new patron, supplying, like the U.S military, a transient workforce with few local connections or investments. Through the movement of staff between the camp and ACM's other operations, as well as through the parent company, Wackenhut, Woomera - like other Australian camps - is simultaneously inserted into the global punishment industry and the Prison Industrial Complex (Gordon 1998-9).

44. As throughout much of Australia, in the absence of local knowledge, public understandings of the camp's mostly Muslim, Middle Eastern or Arab inmates draw heavily on orientalist stereotypes reinforced by current racialised anxieties. Detainees are linked with groups recently targeted by a number of highly visible domestic events: the frequent reports by officials such as the NSW Premier and Police Commissioner that *ethnic gangs* and *thugs of Middle Eastern appearance* terrorise suburban Sydney; by representations of Islam as a violent and misogynist religion inherently oppressive of women, representations buttressed by tabloid accounts of racially motivated rapes of Anglo-Australian women by gangs of Middle Eastern men; by studies linking high levels of unemployment with suburbs identified with Arab and Middle Eastern migrants; by claims that these populations are intractable to assimilation into the Judeo-Christian value-system and work ethic. These homegrown representations collude with and are swelled by international, mostly U.S-based, reports of Islamic terror and fundamentalism.

45. The conflation of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern asylum seeker and the fundamentalist terrorist was reinforced in 2001 by the events leading up to the *Tampa*

stand-off, followed only a couple of weeks later by the terror attacks in the U.S. In the climate of an approaching general election the great repulse of the Tampa served first as a surrogate war for the government and later, fortuitously, was available to be mobilised into the charged emotional rhetoric of the real war in Afghanistan (Perera 2002). Then Defence Minister Reith's remark that the Tampa's passengers could well include 'sleepers for terrorism' is only the most obvious example of the ways in which asylum seekers became stand-ins for terrorists. A more insidious instance was Prime Minister Howard's statement that people who could throw their children overboard were not the sort of people he wanted in this country (Allard and Clennell 2001; MacCallum 2002).

46. Here, asylum seekers were asserted to have behaved in inhuman and incomprehensibly violent ways and represented as the kind of people who would stick at nothing to achieve their ends - thus being linked by imputation to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. The continuing revelations about the Howard government's role in promoting lurid and increasingly gruesome rumours about asylum seekers - that they were the type of people who could throw their children overboard or sew up their children's lips in order to blackmail decent Australians - only reinforce the conclusion that a deliberate campaign was waged to associate asylum seekers with fanaticism, terror and inhumanity.

47. The merging of the asylum seeker into the terrorist and the representation of aspiring refugees as threats to national security serves a further function. It in turn legitimises a militarised response against the unarmed and defenceless. Hence the rhetoric of border protection so heavily invoked in the lead-up to the 2001 general election and in the 2002 budget. The boarding of the Tampa by armed SAS troops was also the prelude to drastic new legislation which (among other things) authorised the navy forcibly to intercept and 'push off' asylum seekers from Australian waters (Kelly 2001; Marr 2001). One such instance, the HMAS Adelaide's decision to open warning fire on, and then board, a boat carrying asylum seekers, was the cause of the boat's sinking and the children thrown into the sea allegations. A few days later two women asylum seekers drowned, the first fatalities directly attributable to the new 'push off' policy, as fire broke out on yet another boat boarded by the Australian navy. Once again, earlier sensationalised allegations by politicians that asylum seekers had deliberately set fire to their own boat were later challenged and quietly allowed to subside (Garran and Sanders 2001; MacCallum 2002).

48. The militarised approach that positions asylum seekers as a dangerous, illegal and even criminally deranged enemy is actualised in the increasingly prison- or fortress-like appearance of Australian camps. *The New York Times* clearly recognises this aspect of the camps in its description of Woomera published in the wake of the December 2001 protests:

a truck that looks like a fire engine pump stands at the ready, with a water cannon to dispel crowds. Strips of galvanized steel form a 20-foot-high fence topped by a spiral of shiny razor wire. Inside that fence is another coil of razor wire, stretched out on the dirt, five feet high. Yet another metal fence rises behind that.

A sign at the gate says, "Welcome to Woomera Immigration, Reception and Processing Centre." (Gaylord 2001)

49. The militarised appearance of Woomera embodies the logic by which the asylum seeker, represented as an illicit and dangerous figure, becomes liable to punitive detention in the prison-asylum complex. In this field of confusion and misrecognition the anti-Taliban asylum seeker and the pro-Taliban fighter are cast as indistinguishable. Since January 2002 a series of parallels have been drawn by both foreign media and the mainstream Australian press between the treatment of detained asylum seekers at Woomera and the 'battlefield detainees' held at Camp X-Ray. An editorial in the British newspaper *The Independent* described Australia's treatment of asylum seekers at Woomera as 'an even uglier drama' than the one at Guantanomo Bay (Ham 2002), while *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a front-page colour spread captioned 'Two Jails ... guess which one is barred' (January 29, 2002), arguing that Camp X-Ray was in fact the more accessible and open of the two camps.

50. More than anything else, the reception of these accounts indicates the extent to which current policies towards asylum seekers have become *normalised* in Australia. The absence of any great public or government protest at the comparison suggests on one level the success of official representations of asylum seekers: in the toxic smog of misinformation generated by our leaders any distinction between the punitive imprisonment of enemy soldiers and the precautionary custody of asylum seekers (likely future citizens, after all, given the high rate of refugee claims proven to be genuine) becomes inoperative or irrelevant. But on another, ominous, level the absence of public or official objections to comparisons between Woomera and Camp X-Ray reveal the failure of the government's protestations about the innocuous nature of its 'detention facilities, services and activities' (MacCallum 2002: 8). This tacit consent of (according to all accounts) the wide majority of the Australian public to practices that mete out similar treatment to asylum seekers and enemy soldiers is nothing less than a tacit agreement *in the face of the camp.*

51. Australia's assent in the presence of the camp regularises that space of exception 'in which the normal order is de facto suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law, but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who

temporarily act as sovereign' there (Agamben 1997: 113). And, indeed, as ACM and DIMIA [Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs] operate as the sole authorities in these spaces of exception and the juridical and political protections of national and international law are placed in suspension, our collective national assent to the institution of the camp entails also an assent to all that is implied in the *idea* of the camp.

52. In recent months Australia's camps have been described as 'gulags' (by former Prime Minister Fraser) and 'hell holes' (by Democrat Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja). In January 2002 in the wake of the mass protests at Woomera, members of a medical delegation made a considered comparison between Woomera and a concentration camp, arguing that although the former does not share the Nazi camps' aim of deliberate extermination, its levels of depersonalisation, isolation and denial of the humanity of its internees deserves no other name (Dudley, Mares and Gale 2002).

53. Nor can analogies with Nazism be dismissed as the ravings of fringe groups or intellectual 'elites': it was no radical or member of the despised 'chattering classes' but a former navy chief, Rear Admiral Richard Peek, who described government control of information about asylum seekers as being 'rather in the way the German population was treated by Dr Goebbels. If it's not the Australian Navy, I think it's the Australian public. They're being kept from the truth of what's going on in the world' (Garran and Saunders 2002).

54. The spectre of the concentration camp cannot be exorcised even from official government accounts, such as the report of a second parliamentary committee on Australian detention camps concluded in 2001. Although the report by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade is, on most counts, a circumspect document, the preliminary part of the report contains the passages:

4. 237 .... most committee members were shocked by what they saw during their visits to the six centres.
4.238   Earlier in this chapter there was a reference to the physical impact the detention centres had on those members who made the visits: the double fences, barbed wire. Inside the centres the strongest memory some committee members retained was the despair and depression of some of the detainees, their inability to understand why they were being kept in detention in isolated places, in harsh physical conditions with nothing to do. (65)

55. The parliamentarians' report succinctly reveals the meeting of the double-edged word "asylum" in the regime of Australia's detention camps: here people seeking a haven of refuge and protection are instead confronted with prolonged, involuntary incarceration in a punitive, institutionalised environment that imperils their very being (Silove, Steel and Mollica 2001; Rogella and Highfield 2001; RACP). The Report acknowledges the destructive impact of prolonged isolation and involuntary confinement on its inmates, an acknowledgment that also entails an implicit understanding that the almost daily occurrence of violent events in the camps is no aberration, but an inevitable response by both inmates and custodians to the institution in which they function. The inmates' past and present, their very humanity, are consumed and erased by the institution: *My name is asylum/I was born in here...*

56. The report contains the (repressed) recognition that at the heart of the disturbing and troublesome events that occur on a daily basis in our 'detention centres' is the very structure of the camp.

> The correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the camps is, therefore, not hypocritically to ask how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest, and above all, more useful carefully to investigate the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer a crime. (At this point, in fact, everything had truly become possible).

Agamben 1997: 110

Post Script: Breaching the Camp?

The government uses ... isolation to convince the refugees that they are not welcome in this country. That, where they have landed is not Australia but DIMA Land and ACM Land. If you were them why wouldn't you believe it - why wouldn't you believe that they haven't landed in Australia - the land of the free, but in DIMA and ACM Land? And in a funny kind of a way they believe the truth. This government has declared certain sites of land unAustralian - the laws that operate in these camps and consequently their whole life is unAustralian.

Imaginepeace, 23 February 2002

57. The destructiveness of the camp is inextricable from its function of quarantine and isolation. Razor wire and metal fencing mark out the camp as a space of exception, a place that is not-Australia - DIMA Land or ACM Land - and within whose carceral structure inmates are at once denationalised and dehumanised. Five layers of wire protect the threshold between Australia and its other, *not-Australia, DIMA Land, ACM Land.*

58. The 'Imaginepeace' Busketeers are a group of Australians who rode a Freedom Bus to Australia's isolated detention camps expressing their support for asylum seekers. Their actions were designed to perforate and dislocate the boundaries of the camp: by placing their own daily lives in suspension to travel to the isolated places where asylum seekers are quarantined; by physical attacks on the fences surrounding the camps and attempts to cut through the razor wire; by symbolic actions such as flying kites or throwing flowers and messages across the border into not-Australia. By these acts protesters deliberately mark themselves as unAustralian. They confound, puncture and displace the boundaries between included and excluded, camp and nation, symbolically denationalising themselves from the official uses to which Australian is put.

59. These acts of symbolic denationalisation are performed in a climate where citizenship has taken on new weight in many western countries. In the wake of 9/11 heightened policing and surveillance of the borders combine with added restrictions on nationality and citizenship (Fekete 2002). Legislative moves like the U.S 'Patriots Act' subject long term residents to the risk of summary denationalisation on the grounds of religion, ethnicity or race, while the U.K White Paper on citizenship proposes unprecedented links between the English language and British nationality and citizenship. Denationalisation, criminalisation and racialisation are the triangulated links by which the category of the 'citizen' is shored up from within as the 'War on Terror' wages on at home and abroad.

60. In this context the un-Australian activities of the Busketeers and their allies defy the current consolidations and certainties of the 'citizen', while along a different axis the sinister trinity of denationalisation, criminalisation and racialisation provides opportunities for other forms of alliance and action by groups traditionally excluded from full participation in the nation. As Jane Bai and Eric Tang write, since 911 in the U.S Arabic and South Asian migrants in particular have been positioned 'at the forefront of racist state violence' as 'the new face of racial profiling, racist laws, and deprivation of civil liberties' - issues that hitherto have been a primary focus for Afro-American activists. 'Thus', Bai and Tang conclude, 'the "war at home" also provides a strong basis for new forms of collectivity among immigrants, citizens of color, and indigenous peoples in the fight against the prison industrial complex' (Bai and Tang 2002).

61. The need to mobilise through different alliances, collectivities and coalitions suggests in turn new possibilities for realigning and reconfiguring identities and struggles within the nation-state. Countering official attempts to consolidate or reinforce the figure of the citizen, the formation of new categories and identities around the refugee can be envisioned as stages in the dissolution of the citizen as the privileged repository of rights and in the dismantling of the lethal structure of the camp on which the nation-state depends. In a scenario of denationalisation and deterritorialisation of the citizen the excluded figure of the refugee offers a basis for other models of political formation and organisation, as in Agamben's proposal of 'a coming political community':

given the by now unstoppable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional political juridical categories, the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today ... the forms and limits of a coming political community. It is even possible that, if we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen ... the sovereign people, the worker and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew, starting from the one and only figure of the refugee. (Agamben 2000: 16.7)

62. As I write the concluding paragraphs of this essay on Good Friday 2002, hundreds of people bearing blood-red flags are converging on the multiple layers of wire that encircle the camp at Woomera (http://melbourne.indymedia.org). Effortlessly, they breach a perimeter fence and walk across metres of flattened wire. They are chanting: *No borders, No Nation / No Deportation.* Asylum seekers on the other side wave and chant back: *Freedom, Freedom.* Scratched and bleeding hands reach out through torn razor wire. People laugh and cry. A young girl screams repeatedly; in joy or fear, it's hard to tell. Suddenly, two bars have been pried apart. In the narrow aperture, a figure stands still for a moment then dives, like a bird, in an unforgettable, swooping, flying, movement ... onto the outstretched arms of the crowd. Another follows, a third, a sixth. Almost fifty people in all breach the borders of not-Australia and flow into the throng outside. Camp guards make ineffectual lunges here and there, but *legal* and *illegal* are hard to tell apart. The chants start up again: *no one is illegal. No one is illegal.* Everyone is, joyously, un-Australian.

63. Something momentous has happened in Australia on this lazy holiday weekend, as parliament goes into long recess and people head off along choked freeways to some resort-retreat. Some of us have glimpsed extraordinary things. We have seen how simple it is to make the razor wire collapse, if only for an hour, before our eyes. And we have seen, for once, no longer occluded or unpeopled by the structure of the camp, *the one and only figure of the refugee.* A figure that beckons ... and waits.

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