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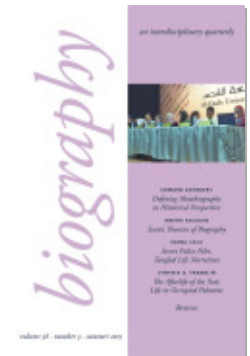
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THE HOSPITALITY OF CYBERSPACE: MOBILIZING ASYLUM SEEKER TESTIMONY ONLINE

GILLIAN WHITLOCK

THE ORANGE BOAT

In January 2014 several unmarked orange lifeboats came ashore on the coastline of West Java. Described as “sophisticated orange vessels” by Indonesian authorities, and “UFO” by the Javanese villagers, these craft were eventually identified as part of a fleet of eleven “unsinkable” hi tech lifeboats ordered by the Australian government as part of “Operation Sovereign Borders,” a militarized program to stop asylum seekers from gaining access to the Australian migration zone to the south. Australian authorities acknowledged the acquisition of these vessels, but remained silent on their deployment. These hard-hulled lifeboats are fitted with safety and navigational equipment, supplied with food and water and, it emerged, were vital weapons in a new “tow back” policy implemented in secrecy and in the interests of national security and border control under the auspices of the “Stop the Boats” campaign.¹ In these boats asylum seekers were towed back to Indonesia by Australian Customs and Border Patrol (ACBP) vessels, returned by force to the shores they left in unseaworthy Indonesian fishing boats a few weeks before.

Several weeks after pictures of the beached boats were first circulated in the popular media, a testimonial narrative that presents a detailed visual and verbal account of a voyage was included in a broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Archived at the ABC website, this testimony includes evidence of a “tow back” voyage filmed on a smartphone by the asylum seekers captive within the orange boat. In this testimonial, asylum seekers from Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal offer their own account of an enforced “tow back” journey, providing graphic evidence of their experiences at sea in one of the “zones of exclusion” that preemptively stop asylum

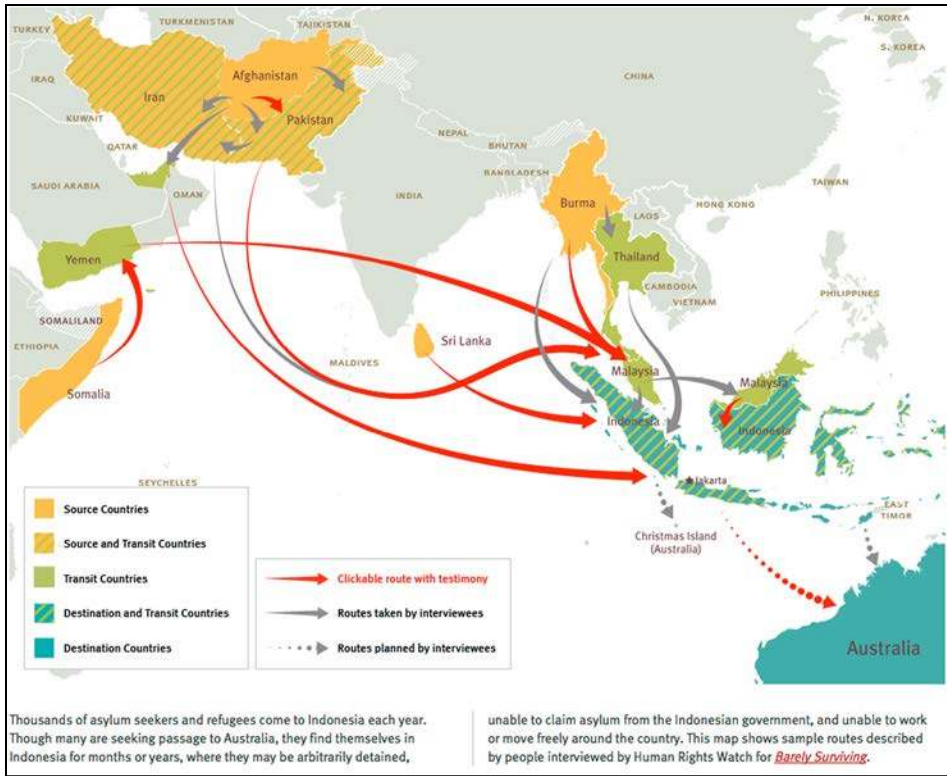


Figure 1. Human Rights Watch. © Copyright 2013 John Emerson/Human Rights Watch.

seekers gaining access to Australian sovereign territory.² Hosted by a national broadcaster, this testimony is subtitled, and amplified by interviews with the detainees filmed at a camp in Java. It is then networked into one of the banal spaces of everyday life: the nightly current affairs report that is a ritual of ordinary, domestic life—the quotidian existence supposedly under threat by these others who threaten to invade. This asylum seeker testimony stakes a claim to human rights, and invokes the humanitarian obligations of citizens to strangers who seek sanctuary. The affordances of Web 2.0 technologies are essential to the assemblage that hijacks this boat, and create an opening for the transient and opportunistic dynamics of microactivism and its spontaneous capture of a testimonial event.

The introduction of “Operation Sovereign Borders” and this tow back strategy in the southern ocean in October 2013 coincided with the commencement of a new maritime operation in the Mediterranean, “Mare Nostrum,” a response to the mass drowning off the coast of Lampedusa when a boat carrying migrants from Libya sank with the loss of 360 lives. This

search and rescue operation by the Italian navy adopted a punitive approach to people smugglers who traffic in human lives, and a humanitarian approach to those at risk, offering asylum seekers safe passage to Italy and, it followed, ready access to the European Union. Although geographically remote, “Operation Sovereign Borders” and “Mare Nostrum” are intimately connected, recto to verso. Both claim to make humanitarian responses to human suffering; the testimony released from the orange boat, however, makes clear the appropriation of humanitarianism in Australian militarized border control operations.

LIQUID LIVES

It is Jacques Derrida who attaches, indelibly, thinking on hospitality to asylum seekers. His essays and seminars on hospitality and cosmopolitanism were provoked by the violent imposition of new laws on immigrants and those without rights of residence, the “sans-papiers,” that led to mass demonstrations in France in 1996. Derrida locates a contradictory imperative within the concept of hospitality. On the one hand there is an unconditional hospitality that offers the right of refuge and sanctuary to all immigrants and newcomers. Unconditional hospitality is, for Derrida, foundational to ethics and integral to humanity (Still 5). And yet, pragmatic conditions—politics, history, law—set limits to the rights of hospitality, and establish the temporality of asylum, and these two sets of obligations remain unreconciled. In the lectures collected in *Of Hospitality*, conducted in Paris in 1996 and presented in response to Anne Dufourmantelle, Derrida uses the concept of hospitality to reconsider a series of political and ethical issues. The question of what challenges arrive at the borders in the presence of the other, the stranger, the foreigner, produces a series of close readings of texts that include Plato’s dialogues and Greek tragedy. Derrida “obsesses” these texts—the term is Dufourmatelle’s (6)—to address the problematics attached to the ethics of hospitality as a matter of urgency at the end of the millennium (8). Presciently, the seminars include speculations on new technologies, and in particular, mobile telephony, email, and the Internet. For Derrida, new technologies initiate transformations of public space at those borders between public and private, citizen and non-citizen, foreign and non-foreign. New technologies are located at the threshold where possibilities of sociality and reciprocity coincide with the conditions of possibility for violence, coercion, and control. Embedded in thinking on the hospitality of cyberspace, then, are the possibilities for reformulations of ethical relations that follow from the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies. These possibilities include new spaces of hospitality as well as militant enforcement of border controls, manifested in, for example, the

coexistence of “Operation Sovereign Borders” and “Mare Nostrum” in the global politics of forced migration.

Migrants, refugees, exiles, and asylum seekers are on the move. They are travelers, eluding the border control and surveillance facilities that “secure” the domestic spaces of citizenship. They are passengers in unseaworthy boats, sequestered beneath trucks and carriages, and sealed in cargo containers. Border controls pervasively map zones of exclusion onto spaces of everyday life where elites roam the planet with affluent lifestyles and multiple careers, and enjoy the privileges of freedom of movement and high levels of network capital. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s formulation of “liquid life,” Anthony Elliott and John Urry identify mobility as central to contemporary identity formation and subjectivity, and reconfigure the relations between embodiment and technology to suggest how the software-operated digital technologies of Web 2.0 are corporeally interwoven with the self in the process (and processing) of mobile, “liquid” lives. They identify new technologies of the self: “miniaturised mobilities” (5) (smartphones, laptops, iPads) that are not just devices that surround the self and enable physical mobility, and not only accessories that are carried on the body, but portable technical systems that reformulate the self’s relations with affect, time, and space, becoming intrinsic to embodiment and to “portable personhood” (3). These devices both transmit information and store and mobilize affect: memory, anxiety and desire, pleasure and pain, anger and fear. In this schema, affordances include both the capacities of new technologies to transfer information, and newly mobilized ways of being in the world—a reformulation of the relationship between “technology” and “self” and its “bio.” However, as Elliott and Urry point out, “globalism ushers in an individualized order of flexible, liquid and increasingly mobile and uncertain lives, at least for some citizens in some parts of the contemporary world” (6). What happens when these “miniaturised mobilities” are carried by the dispossessed? How do they mediate painful emotions such as fear and abjection, and what resources for social protest and collective action become available to them?

MICROACTIVISM

Questions about the capacity of new digital technologies and social networking sites to host social protest and human rights activism have to date focused on the role of Web 2.0 in the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, and the earlier Green Revolution in Iran. These revolts were galvanized by social media, and the events on the streets of Cairo, Tehran, and New York were played out live and in real time on 24/7 news channels and over the Internet. We now live, Brian Brivati points out, in the era of the mass

eyewitness account, in which unmediated communications can make individual testimony global, and groups using social media platforms “can shake the foundations of governments on a much wider, and more representative, scale” (240). This agency is not a given, however: the digitizing of testimony can produce a flow of “inconvenient truths”; the individual voice, witnessing abuse or torture and mobilizing protest, can be silenced or ignored if it does not fit with an established ideological position; and the protests of the Arab Spring galvanized social change only when they were amplified by global news media and framed as the Facebook Revolution. Brivati’s assessment of the creation and dissemination through social media of the firsthand testimony of people on the ground sets out two sides of the debate. On the one hand “cyberrealists” insist that there is nothing inherently revolutionary or democratic about digital technologies, which can readily be put to work to enforce social constraints and compliance by way of propaganda, surveillance, and intelligence gathering. Alternatively, “cyberutopianists” assert the hospitality of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies in terms of its openness to citizen activism and the capacity of digital technology to mobilize social protest by, for example, coordinating and publicizing nonviolent resistance tactics such as occupations, transporting mobilizing strategies globally, and attracting news media attention to digital content, as images from the streets taken by citizens are then circulated on news channels. Brivati concludes that new communications technologies have “changed the way events happen” by engineering a paradigm shift that empowers eyewitnesses as agents of change. The “evidence of people on the ground, close to events, can now embed a more complex view of how change takes place” (251). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith coin a new term, “e-witnessing,” for these eyewitness politics and forms of activism enabled by new technologies and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and suggest that “digitally voiced” testimonies might not conform to the tropes, plots, and rhetorics of victim narratives circulated by human rights activism in print cultures.

E-witnessing and its digital voice, Schaffer and Smith argue, require scholars and activists to formulate new literacies and new modes of cultural analysis to understand how social media intersect with social protest and advocacy: “the multifaceted assemblages brought into play by digital technology may exceed our modes of analysis and intellectual grasp and deny the possibility of synthesis” (234). This notion of assemblages suggests complex flows, connections, and becomings in a fluid and ongoing process. Most particularly it reformulates humanist understandings of technologies of the self and draws on new materialisms to redistribute agency and attach it to things as well—to “miniature mobilities”: devices such as cell phones and BlackBerrys, and virtual platforms of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and

Tumblr. These assemblages of self and technology recognize the affordances of the latter to move bodies and objects, and ideas and emotions in a networking of digital selves mobilized by the Web 2.0 environment.³ Assemblages are notoriously unstable “little machines” that engineer connections among bodies, affects, technologies, and practices, opening “experimental territory that becomes invested with affective and transformative capacities” (Kennedy et al. 46). The agency of human-nonhuman assemblages is not the singular action of an autonomous human subject; it is an ensemble of bodies and things, a process of encounters and events. This notion of the assemblage questions traditional modes and campaigns of human rights activism, and turns instead to fluid and decentralized “microactivisms” that emerge across a multiplicity of media devices and tools. These activisms may coalesce into claims of collective identity and social solidarity, or disperse into the ether. What kind of e-witnessing and microactivism can occur in an environment when there is no progressive grammar of testimony, no progressive syntax leading from injustice to redress grounded in the stable testimony of victims and secondary witnesses (Schaffer and Smith 229)?

UNIDENTIFIED FOREIGN OBJECTS

The transformation of the orange boat into a platform for a transformative testimonial account draws on traditions of asylum seeker microactivism. Joseph Pugliese insists that refugees are adept at transforming and resignifying those seemingly benign First World civilian sites, technologies, and transports, such as hotel rooms, containers, and demountables (planes, ships, and trucks) that are instrumentalized as detention cells outside immigration detention centers and prisons. He emphasizes the proximity of penal and civil spaces, and the adjacency of global elites and the dispossessed. The production and dissemination of a testimonial event in the tow back voyage transforms and resignifies a First World civilian transport in precisely this way. By presenting an account of forced detention in a lifeboat—a vessel designed to rescue and sustain—asylum seekers become “producers” of testimony on their own account. Introduced by Axel Bruns, the term “producer” signifies the convergence of producers and users (and users as products in the sense of commodities) in the Web 2.0 environment. The affordances of the smartphone enable the production and dissemination of this testimonial narrative that captures the abjection and suffering of asylum seekers in the process of deportation, and then the affective force of anger and retribution in response. In the hands of asylum seekers, these devices not only gather and present evidence of these traumatic voyages but, as Urry and Elliott suggest, they also mobilize affect, and in doing so these bodies and things in motion “produce” testimonial narrative for a



Figure 2. Orange lifeboat on an Indonesian shore, 25 Feb. 2014. © Copyright 2014 AAP Image/El Darmawan.

digital age. The argument that through their movements across ocean spaces these refugee bodies inscribe new and embodied relations is now well established (by Suvendrini Perera’s ongoing work on oceanic “corpo-graphies,” for example). However, those consigned to the “socially dead”—asylum seekers, indentured labor, and detainees—now travel with mobile digital devices that capture evidence of abjection and captivity with unprecedented intimacy, and disseminate their testimonial narratives to a global networked public.

Smartphones and satellite phones are essential tools carried by refugees and asylum seekers: for negotiating their onward passage with people smugglers, for communicating with those they have left behind in their homelands, and for calling those they hope to join at their destination. Mobile digital phones are now widely used even in societies where the state no longer exists and infrastructures are controlled by warlords and criminal gangs—places where there is an exodus of refugees. In *A Million Shillings* Alixandra Fazzina shows how mobile phones are a necessity among the few belongings—usually a small bag with a few clothes—of Somali refugees trying to reach Yemen through the Gulf of Aden or the Straits of Djibouti. Although this journey is made by basic forms of mobility—walking, or on the back of flatbed trucks—and through precarious and insecure roads and routes, mobile phones are essential, and used to communicate, synchronize, and coordinate movements

(Gill, Caletrió, and Mason 308). In Indonesia, asylum seekers are constantly online; they Facebook, Tweet, email, text, and phone (Toohey 25). Mobile phones are necessary for “people smugglers”—the Australian government’s term for agents who collect and deliver human cargo at the right time and the right place to avoid police and military controls. And as a last resort, these are the devices that enable emergency calls for rescue at sea.

The journey that ends in the orange boat begins on the route taken by asylum seekers who move south from the Middle East and South Asia to Malaysia and Indonesia, and across the Arafura and Timor seas to enter the Australian migration zone, travelling on Indonesian fishing boats that are perilously unseaworthy (see Figure 1). Fear attaches to these bodies-on-the-move in boats. The slogan “Stop the Boats” emerged with renewed force in Australia in the autumn of 2013, in association with a federal election campaign and the change of government that followed. This spasm of paranoid nationalism produced by a perceived crisis in national security due to increasing numbers of arrivals by boat produced “Operation Sovereign Borders”: a campaign of naval interception, extended offshore processing, and heightened stigmatization of asylum seekers. “Stop the Boats” is a familiar mantra in Australian nationalist discourse, which uses synecdoche to configure the boat as a sign of invasion and contamination. This metonymically displaces the presence of the people who claim sanctuary to focus on the vessels that carry them into the Australian migration zone. The testimony from the orange boat, on the other hand, insists on the embodied presence of the asylum seekers, and viscerally so.

The boat becomes a vital actant at this scene of microactivism, both challenging and transforming its projection as an object of fear in discourses of border control, and creating a new space for social activism. Discussions of the reciprocity of scene and screen—public physical space and the digital public sphere—inspired by the Arab Spring have opened up theorizing on the performativity of space and mobilization of affect that occurs there. This entanglement of digital platforms, physical space, and bodily presence in e-witnessing requires new modes of cultural analysis. Derek Gregory, for example, argues that a performative sense of space in the creation of user-generated content was essential to the activation of the Arab uprisings: Tahrir is both a space and an act, a “space-in-process”: “one in which action (and its precarious performativity, the effects it brings into being) cannot be severed from the space through which it is achieved” (“Tahrir” 242). Gregory’s observation extends Elliott and Urry’s thinking on “miniature mobilities” and “portable personhood,” and the digital reformulation of the self’s embodied relations to time and technology, space and affect to analyze specific sites of microactivism. Following Judith Butler in “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” Gregory describes these performances of spatiality as precarious and conditional: “those of us

who inhabit the privileges that are attached to sectors of Europe and North America need to learn from the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria that the contemporary public sphere depends not on a digital repertoire alone (important though this is) but also on brave bodies-in-alliance installing new spaces through the conjuncture of what Butler calls ‘streets and media’ (“Tahrir” 244).

The orange boat is a long way from the Arab Street, where citizens are seeking democracy in the public spaces of their own homelands. Asylum seekers are strangers that are stigmatized as the barbarians at the gates of our privileged enclaves, claiming their human rights to sanctuary and citizenship. However, the events at Tahrir have inspired new work on corporeality, microactivism, and digital witness that pertains to transformations and resignifications of First World civilian sites, technologies, and transports by the dispossessed, such as the hijacking of the orange boat to produce a vehicle for testimonial agency. Most importantly for thinking about this transformation, Gregory and Butler both insist on the “reciprocities between screen and scene,” the “virtual and visceral” (“Tahrir” 240), in performances of corporeal space by those who occupied Tahrir, and this includes the materiality of the square and the digital public space engineered through Facebook, Twitter, and the Internet. The concept of “precarious performativity” and the role of space as an actant are vital for understanding the testimonial event that is staged from the orange boat.

DISSEMINATION

A media ecology hosts this testimony, drawing on both social media such as YouTube and conventional broadcast media, in the first instance a nightly current affairs program, the *7.30 Report* produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that later fed into other broadcast media networks, both national and international. The mix of new and old technologies and networks is important for authentication and witness—key functions in the dissemination and reception of e-witnessing, as Brian Brivati suggests. A smartphone enables this testimony from within the hull of the orange boat, and its portholes and hatches frame sights of ACBP vessels in the act of “tow back,” even as this deployment was officially denied. This device allows the asylum seekers to speak and present evidence in their own languages, although it is the networking through the public broadcaster that facilitates the translation and subtitles, and the transcript that releases this testimony into Anglophone networks online. The Internet, social networking sites such as YouTube, and the online presence of media organizations that archive investigative reportage such as this are essential to the projection and authentication

of this evidence in the public sphere, where it circulates through both social networking (on Facebook sites, for example) and conventional media (both national and international broadcasts and print journalism). The assemblage of platforms and technologies that host and disseminate this testimony includes the affordances of conventional media forms: the format of the television news documentary, the rigor of its production teams that include translators and the authority and reputation of its journalists in the field, and the familiarity of the studio anchor who bears witness to the authenticity of the account. All of this is essential to the transmission of this testimonial, which becomes part of a wider debate about representations of asylum seekers and the responsibilities of the national broadcaster to the national interest in the context of “Operation Sovereign Borders.”⁴ Both the capture and the dissemination of this testimonial account in digital and broadcast media challenge the controlled environment of border security discourse, which draws on the boat as a highly charged abstract and symbolic space transformed in the course of this event and hijacked to produce a site of microactivism. What we observe here, to return to Derrida’s speculations on hospitality, is an instance where new technologies are mobilized at the threshold, where possibilities of sociality and reciprocity coincide with the conditions of possibility for violence, coercion, and control.

What emerges, then, is a composite testimonial account, hosted by both conventional and new media technologies, where each component is necessary and instrumental. The interviews, conducted in the relative safety of the Indonesian detention center, amplify the testimony filmed on board the boat. Like the paratexts that surround testimonial narratives in print media, the interviews have an authenticating function: they are conducted by a reputable journalist (an amanuensis of sorts), and they are translated, subtitled, and available as transcripts at the ABC website. The asylum seekers recall their captivity aboard two vessels at sea. The first is the armed ACBP patrol boat “Triton,” where they are subjected to techniques of incarceration and deprivation that render them abject. Mahboube Mousavi testifies that they were subjected to humiliation as detainees, held for almost a week in

a very dark room. No matter how much we begged them to put a light bulb in the room, they would just shut the door on us, although there was a very small window. They covered it with cardboard from the back so that we couldn’t see any light.

. . . My heart troubled me there very much. I actually saw death in from [sic] of my eyes. I actually had difficulty breathing. I asked them to at least remove the cardboard and open the door so that we have fresh air. They said, “We are not allowed.” (“Passengers describe”)

Arash Sedigh recalls the impotence of the group's appeals for humanitarian aid such as medical assistance on board the "Triton" (that mythological messenger of the sea): "For Jesus Christ, please help us. Would you please help us?" What follows is an account of further terror and suffering during the voyage in the hull of the lifeboat in the process of tow back: "Everybody were vomiting, just baby and women crying, screaming, everybody vomiting, sick." These are graphic and intimate verbal and embodied testimonies of expulsion: a violent evacuation of bodily contents and fluids in the process of ejection from the maritime exclusion zone back to Indonesian territory. This language of abjection is performative. Asylum seekers testify to their experiences of being rendered disgusting objects, a visceral experience of being disoriented and displaced. What occurs in the orange boat is a grueling process of abjection—literally, of casting out—as the asylum seekers must be contained and then expelled. Sara Ahmed accentuates this association of abjection and borderscapes: border objects are disgusting, and disgust engenders border objects (87). This visceral projection of disgust and shaming, which fills the hull of the orange boat with bodily fluids, becomes a primal scene of abjection: "Boat was strange smelly and very small as people reaching there so we felt vomiting, vomiting, vomiting, vomiting," Nouradin Mousavi recalls. Asylum seekers bear witness to being shamed, and in turn, viewers of the broadcast are called to witness their shame as the shameful of national subjects whose citizenship is secured by expulsions such as this, which "stop the boats" and secure the homelands.

A series of actants are vital to the assemblage that creates this media event. These include the orange boat, the smartphone, the embodied presence of asylum seekers and CBP officers, and the agency of ocean, winds, and beach, as well as the apparatus of the daily current affairs report. The visual clips filmed on the smartphone from within the orange boat that are integrated into the *7.30 Report* and uploaded to YouTube are essential. These begin with utopian images of the voyage out on the decks of the leaky fishing boat at sea, where the asylum seekers travel south from Java into the Australian migration zone. Their film concludes with the dystopian return: the "tow back" voyage across the Indian Ocean in the orange boat to the Javanese shores they left a few weeks before. This journey is filmed and narrated from the orange boat at sea, where the sight of ACBP vessels and officers is framed from the perspective of its portholes through the lens of the mobile phone. Arash Sedigh recalls: "I just asked my friends, 'Does anybody have a camera? We have to take movie as evidence.'" Like the activists documenting the Arab Spring in the precise time and space of Tahrir, this testimony turns to what Schaffer and Smith call "microactivism": the spontaneous capture of evidence of an

event, grievance, or situation that can be disseminated via various protocols and platforms, forestalling government censorship (228). This testimonial evidence confirms the reality of the rumored yet officially denied “tow back” policy, and the use of hi-tech lifeboats in enforced deportation from the migration zone. The intimacy and affect mediated by the smartphone is vital to the performativity of space here. It is held in the hand, propelled by a body as it moves erratically, and captures sound bites of confusion and fear from this sequestered space. It is vital to the assemblage of actants that come into play here, at this scene of subjection.

As the orange boat approaches the beach, navigated by an Indonesian crew for these last stages of the tow back voyage, the men are released from captivity in the hull and the surveillance of the Australian border patrol, and from the roof of the lifeboat they express their anger. This emancipation enables a perverse testimony that refuses the norms of human rights activism. By invoking the threat of retribution born of abjection and suffering they conform to the identity of the Islamic militants that inspire the militarized border security campaigns such as “Operation Sovereign Borders.” Now the smartphone captures their disgust, presented directly to the camera, in English:

ARASH SEDIGH (on asylum seeker boat): They put us in this f**king orange boat and sent us back to Indonesia. And the Navy was escorting that ship until today. . . . F**k Australia. . . . I said to them, “You are criminals.” If later on you said why they do that to America on September 11, you should know the cause of it is your very deeds. Remember 9–11 for United States. All the world should know why. Australian Government, Tony Abbott, Scott Morrison, Immigration—all of them are the smugglers.

MAN (on asylum seeker boat): F**k Australia! (“Passengers describe”)

This is, to turn to Imogen Tyler’s rich account of social abjection, a moment when those who are subjected to control, stigma, and censure—“revolting subjects”—resist and revolt against their subjectification as foreign objects. The perversity of the orange boat, the lifeboat that becomes a detention cell, fuels the abjection and anger that is captured and then transferred so graphically and audibly by the smartphone. Often visceral, and dependent on the spectacle of the suffering body and “scenes of subjection” (Hartman 3), testimonial narrative is frequently angry, shocking, and graphic. It claims to speak the truth, to bear witness to suffering, pain, and death, and it draws on harrowing detail to authenticate these claims. For these reasons, testimony is carefully managed in its various venues: the protocols of the courtroom or formal commission, for example, and in literature, the generic formulations of testimonio and slave narratives that conform to the civilities of humanitarian activism.

Testimony's volatility is traditionally "managed" in print by paratexts generated by benevolent witnesses: amanuenses, editors, publishers, activists. Here the affordances of the smartphone enable a corporeal testimony that captures the volatile affective force of captivity in the orange boat on the bodies it contains, and the outburst of pain, anger, disgust, vituperation, and retribution that follows relinquishes all claims to humanitarian benevolence and sanctuary.

REVOLTING SUBJECTS

The refugee created by human rights discourse as a "rights-bearing suffering subject" (Kennedy et al. 51) is discarded in this speech from the decks of the boat, within sight of the Indonesian beach where they are returned. Conventionally, what becomes available to those who identify as refugees and who use that identity for political mobilization is an identity grounded in what Wendy Brown calls "wounded attachment," a representational politics that enables visibility and claims humanitarian aid and recognition in terms of human rights discourse (those claims the asylum seekers allegedly make aboard the "Triton" in this event). The final scene filmed by the smartphone, however, is not a testimonial narrative from docile bodies in search of a benevolent addressee, and this difference returns us to the earlier point made by Schaffer and Smith: "digitally voiced" testimonies might not conform to the tropes, plots, and rhetorics formulated in print cultures. What emerges from the scene of subjection that occurs in the orange boat are indeed Tyler's "revolting subjects."

Only by focusing on the lives of those constituted as abject, Tyler suggests, can we consider the forms of agency that become available to those at the sharp edge of subjugation within prevailing systems of power (38). A reconfiguration of abjection occurs in the graphic corporeal testimony of seasickness in a deterritorialized zone where the public gaze is proscribed. The boat is located at one of those, in Derek Gregory's terms, "vanishing points" where sovereign power and biopower coincide, spaces of both constructed and constricted visibility. This testimonial performance of suffering is revolting testimonial, which presents evidence of suffering and then turns quite explicitly to resistance and dissent. Testimony that deliberately provokes aversion in this way is typically suppressed by discourses that regulate asylum seeker speech: the testimonial that is elicited in the formal processing of asylum seekers that must adhere to the formulation of the Refugee Convention, or the exchanges that occur through humanitarian activism, where asylum seekers appeal for compassionate recognition as human beings.⁵

The turn to militant Islam at the end of the tow back voyage—"If later on you said why they do that to America on September 11, you should know

the cause of it is your very deeds”—is “perverse”: it risks vindicating the militarized policy that mandates the asylum seekers’ deprivation and detainment, and the enforced tow back voyage by invoking discourses of terrorism that authorize these military operations of interception. This speech, however, is less a sign of an authentic identity disclosed by “Operation Sovereign Borders” than the culmination of a succession of futile testimonial appeals to an ethics of empathy and the humanitarian imagination on the “Triton” and the lifeboat, invoking Christian humanitarianism, human rights, and then, finally and in anger, a call for retribution that directs disgust back to the nation that renders the speakers abject. This is the response of “foreign” bodies that have become objects of hate, that project disgust back to those who hold them captive and to those citizens whose privileges are secured by these operations of the modern security state. Terrorist bodies invoked in this way are less the attributes of a singular authentic subject than identity categories produced by an assemblage of events, actions, and encounters between human and nonhuman actors. These asylum seekers become both subjects and objects of terror here. Jasbir Puar questions what terrorist corporealities mean and signify, and what they *do*. In approaching the terrorist body as an assemblage, as a spatially and temporally contingent entity, Puar understands it to be a disruptive force conceived in terms of “events, actions, and encounters between bodies” (qtd. in Kennedy et al. 49). In the course of this event, the terrorist body stages a reversal. Terrorism, ostensibly the cause of militarized operations such as “Operation Sovereign Borders,” becomes an effect of detention and the suspension of the human rights protocols offering safe passage for the dispossessed.

This recalcitrant testimony is fuelled by a perverse thing: a lifeboat that offers not sanctuary but a visceral experience of suffering, abjection, and expulsion. In this volatile assemblage of bodies and things the smartphone is also an actant; it captures image and sound, and also, as Elliott and Urry suggest, it holds and transfers affect: abjection, disgust, retribution. Revolting testimony, Tyler argues, contests states of being and states of belonging through the conceptual paradigm of social abjection; it resists abjection and recuperates it to create forms of counter-political speech on behalf of border subjects (5). This testimony is a flare of protest and resistance that might barely register in the public domain or be quickly forgotten or repressed, but which nevertheless matters as a storying of revolt, Tyler insists, as documentary accounts of the lived and material experience of being made into objects are staged at scenes of survival and resilience such as this one (13). Abject testimony, which reveals the suffering body in the ways I have described here, projects a shocking and graphic encounter with suffering. It then pivots to use this abjection to activate. Following the impotence of appeals to humanitarianism and

rights discourse on board the “Triton,” the testimony filmed on the orange boat is staged in terms of revolt.

Revolting speech such as this, Tyler argues, speaks of what it means to be made abject: tortured by words, images, policies, and mechanisms of policing and control. It is a resistance born out of revolt as a “subjectifying force,” as those made abject attempt to reconstitute themselves not only as humans with rights but as subjects of value that refuse and revolt against their classification (214). The narrative of captivity that emerges from experiences aboard the “Triton” and the orange boat is a graphic testimonial account of a lived experience of abjection and expulsion: the hope of the voyage out is followed by interception and incarceration, the encounter with death, the vomiting, sickness, and physical revulsion. This injury then becomes a site of transformation and social activism that eschews rights discourse and appeals to humanitarianism, renounces all claims to the sanctuary of Australian citizenship, and mobilizes the language of militant activism addressed directly to a witnessing public. Via smartphones the orange boat—the lifeboat that becomes a means of enforced capture, deportation, and control—stages this acting and speaking out of abjection, a protest that endures through its online “documentary afterlife” (Tyler 215).

NETWORKING

The composite testimony assembled in ABC’s *7.30 Report* program on the interception and tow back policy is “networked” in both traditional and new media forms. Translators, anchors, journalists, and the authority of the national broadcaster confirm the “metrics of authenticity” of the testimony,⁶ which nurtures receptive networks, and solicits compassionate witness. The capacity of Web 2.0 affordances to capture and disseminate testimonial narrative from leaky boats and lifeboats mobilizes new inscriptions of space and embodiment from asylum seekers on the move in these “borderscapes,” where claims for asylum and violent deportation contest.⁷ Social media and new technologies can facilitate the production and dissemination of digitized testimonial narratives that transform and resignify technologies and transports, as Pugliese suggests. However, the availability of new media to capture and disseminate the testimony of the dispossessed is not to be relied upon. For example, and by way of contrast, a series of four clips filmed on smartphones and uploaded to YouTube in October 2012 as “a boat carrying hazara asylum seekers to Australia” also presents the asylum seekers as “producers” of their own testimonial account. The smartphone camera roves the decks of the fishing boat, and its passengers, many of whom appear to be young Hazara men, address the camera directly, although their speech remains untranslated into

English. I watch this with a colleague who is able to translate the drift of these conversations in both Farsi and Dari. We glimpse a gendered order, with veiled women in the aft and young men casually dressed and at ease reclining on the decks. The men are amiable and eager to communicate. This recalls the leisurely “voyage out” footage on the Indonesian fishing boat that ends with the traumatic tow back voyage in the orange boat. Here is another testimonial from the decks of a boat filmed by the asylum seekers themselves, self-representations captured and disseminated by new technologies and social networks. The fishing boat heads south and the casual conversations on the deck are amiable, though frequently inaudible. In Farsi they talk about their homelands in Iran and Afghanistan. Then the boat runs aground on a coral reef, and remains immobilized. The asylum seekers continue to film periodically, as the conversations on deck continue, desultory now, and turning to memories of home and family. We hear their fears of drowning as several days pass. The men begin to secure the papers and belongings they will try to preserve in the sea, but the humor and banter remains: “Where are you god?” one of them asks, and another answers “I’m here.” This footage remains adrift in cyberspace, unauthenticated, untranslated, and immobilized in the absence of networks of advocacy and social activism that host the testimony from the orange boat. Nevertheless it is eloquent, and suggests how asylum seekers use smartphones to resignify that travelling thing, the boat. Here too the leaky Indonesian fishing boat that is the epicenter of paranoid nationalism, the boat that must be stopped in border security discourse, is translated into the very different cultural imaginaries of the asylum seekers. The fishing boat presents the promise of new worlds just over the horizon, the prospect of death at sea, and finally, a performance of space that stages an absurd and humorous bodily presence that resists the “wounded attachments” conventionally attached to refugees.

Web 2.0 facilitates the circulation of testimony such as this on YouTube. This ready access to a networked public, using devices such as smartphones and satellite phones accessible to people on the move, suggests a hospitality of cyberspace for these “strangers” who approach in search of sanctuary. This testimony remains inconclusive and untranslated in an Anglophonic public sphere, however—a reminder of a perilous voyage in the diasporic networks of refugee transports. More than this, YouTube clips labeled “a boat carrying hazara asylum seekers to Australia” also indicate how social media can render asylum seekers vulnerable. Detached from the networks of social activism and investigative journalism that can authenticate and network asylum seeker testimony, these clips filmed from the decks of the boat attract vilification and hate speech that remain indelibly attached in comments uploaded to YouTube—dark paratexts that frame each viewing, challenging the statements of compassionate witness online with hate speech.

“Hope your boat sank”

“If i were the PM i would give the coast guard a green light to shoot whoever enters the border illegally. Bloody piece of scums” (“a boat”)

To be sure, YouTube metrics indicate that thousands (5,860) have viewed “a boat carrying hazara asylum seekers to Australia,” and a handful (7) “like” it and offer supportive statements that contest the vilification, but the point remains that social media networks offer both access and new venues for disseminating hate and fear, as well as sorrow, compassion, and recognition. Both “a boat carrying hazara asylum seekers to Australia” and the testimony from the orange boat can be viewed as accounts of a new and aggressive process of border control at work to expel illegal migrants and protect against an Islamic insurgency that is attached to the asylum seeker in discourses of border security. Alternatively, they can trigger shame and apology, demonstrating the intimacy of terror and violence close to home, which locates Australian citizenship and sovereignty as dependent on aggressive surveillance and policing. The point is that outcomes of e-witnessing and microactivisms are uncertain, responses are unpredictable, and as Brian Brivati suggests, although individual testimonies can now become global, their impact on policymaking communities remains limited.

THE ELECTRONIC AGORA

At the height of the “Stop the Boats” campaign, revolting testimony hijacked the orange boat to create a moment of rupture where the abjection of asylum seekers in offshore detention and expulsion crafts a speech and political activism of the dispossessed. Microactivism such as this is notoriously transient, active in the mercurial time and place of the “event”: an ephemeral opportunity that creates disturbance and leaves few traces.⁸ Although, as I note above, the orange boat is far removed from places like Tahrir Square, the creation and circulation of “produsage”—user-generated content from these spaces using digital devices and social networks—enables performances of space and identity that can mobilize dissent across the social media spaces of the Internet. Via the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies, asylum seeker testimonial can produce new affective channels and mobilize social activism. Equally, it can remain adrift, unanchored, and beyond networks of advocacy and recognition. Late in the last century, amidst Web 1.0 optimism, studies of online activism were inclined to what Brivati calls “cyberutopianism,” the idea that the Internet is inherently democratizing, a global electric agora where the diversity of human disaffection “explodes in a cacophony of accents” (Castells 138). The fate of the

videos depicting “a boat carrying hazara asylum seekers to Australia” suggests otherwise, a reminder of “cyberrealism”: social networking sites can also be inhospitable platforms that sustain fears of invasion and the exclusion of these strangers aboard boats. Either way, social media and new technologies such as the smartphone facilitate a mobilization of affect that produces new possibilities articulated by the asylum seekers themselves.

As in the original “agora” of ancient Greece, where political participation was reserved for male citizens, in the electronic agora and networked publics of Web 2.0, citizens remain privileged subjects, and the focus of theorizing the sites and agents of social activism online. Just a week after the broadcast of the testimonial from the orange boat by the ABC in February 2014, outbreaks of violence in the offshore detention center on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea resulted in the death of an Iranian asylum seeker, Reza Barati. This incident accelerated the expression of dissent in response to “Operation Sovereign Borders,” and triggered further campaigns of human rights activism in Australia using social media. For example, the campaign *Sorryasylum-seekers.com* used Tumblr to gather and archive individual apologies to asylum seekers from citizens who protested against the inhumanity of this militarized intervention, and who wished to extend hospitality personally. The campaign draws on the tradition of the “Sorry Books,” written apologies to Australian indigenous people who were subjected to policies of child removal. Yet the microactivism triggered within the orange boat suggests the unreliability of such discourses of human rights and campaigns of humanitarian activism. It refuses an ethics of recognition and empathic engagement mobilized by humanitarianism and rights discourse, such as those that authorize the Tumblr site. These are the apparently natural rights, conferred as birthright, that are attached to citizenship, and that sustain the privileges of sovereign subjects to say sorry, and to confer (or withhold) recognition.

The electronic agora produced by Web 2.0 technologies is, like its ancient precursor, a meeting place marked by processes of social inclusion and exclusion that define and defend the privileges of citizenship. Hospitality in theory and practice relates to crossing boundaries between self and other, private and public, individual and collective, at those thresholds of the human where understandings of humanity are established: “hospitality is, by definition, a structure that regulates relations between inside and outside” (Still 11). Derrida’s seminars coincide with further restrictions on the movements of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers in France late in the last century, where the rights of individuals to offer hospitality were further proscribed by law. In the aftermath of 9/11, these thresholds of hospitality have been reconfigured anew by the “architectures of enmity” produced by the war on terror, and

the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Gregory, *Colonial* 24). The exodus of asylum seekers from invasion and civil war in the Middle and Far East coincides with intensified militarized protection of “homelands,” in interventions such as “Operation Sovereign Borders.” Derrida’s return to the past, in his close readings of Sophocles and Plato, suggests that hospitality is an ethical problem that reaches across historical, literary, philosophical, and political contexts, and that these contemporary events have ancient precursors. But we need not turn to Greek tragedy to be reminded of this intertextuality of contemporary and ancient worlds, and how the past haunts the present. The detention of the asylum seekers in the orange boat is, after all, preceded by that period of incarceration aboard the “Triton,” the Australian armored patrol boat named after the mythological Greek god, the messenger of the sea who inhabited the Mediterranean ocean off Libya.

In November 2014, a new militarized policy in the Mediterranean by Frontex (the European agency for external border security) to defend “Fortress Europe” was introduced and codenamed “Operation Triton.” Here too this mythological messenger of the seas is invoked in the name of heightened enforcement of border security at sea, ostensibly to protect the rights of citizens and the security of their homelands, and to deter asylum seekers from attempting the sea crossing. In the spring of 2015, an unprecedented exodus of asylum seekers from Libya and the loss of 750 lives in one shipwreck alone renewed debates about “Operation Triton” and the ethics of hospitality. The “Operation Triton” initiative replaced the Mediterranean search and rescue operations of “Mare Nostrum.” Latin for “Our Sea,” Mare Nostrum was the Roman name for the Mediterranean, and this militarized humanitarian operation was a gesture of unconditional hospitality. Asylum seekers who travel by boat are vulnerable both to the vicissitudes of the elements and to the limits of hospitality in changes of government policy. “Mare Nostrum” arose in mourning for loss of life at sea, and reconfigured the maritime border in a temporary opening to the foreigner, welcoming the stranger into the homelands.

Derrida’s speculations about the hospitality of cyberspace draw new technologies into those thresholds where the boundaries between self and other, citizen and stranger, are constantly under negotiation. This intersection occurs in physical and virtual spaces, and in technologies of the self that are transformed in the performative new spaces enabled by Web 2.0 technologies. For asylum seekers, the affordances of these technologies include increased surveillance and detention, as well as new assemblages that engineer microactivisms in the mercurial spaces of the event. The orange boat continues its voyage online, and the storying of revolt engineered by this little machine remains vivid long after those in search of asylum have dispersed.

NOTES

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1. See Whyte; "Lifeboat"; and "Australia lands."
2. See "Passengers describe"; see also "OSB." These stateless zones were created in terms of the Pacific Solution in 2001, when over four thousand islands were excised from Australian sovereign territory for migration purposes, and offshore processing was introduced in detention centers on Nauru and Manus Islands. Similar "exclusion walls" have been created in North America and Europe.
3. In this way it responds to Julie Rak and Anna Poletti's point that in general the conditions for internet subjectivity remain indebted to classic liberalism and its sovereign subjects. Internet subjects can be many things—citizens, consumers, participants, gamers, lurkers, stalkers—but generally, Rak and Poletti suggest, understandings of identity and selfhood that originated in western modernity and were disseminated in print cultures are transferred to internet subjectivities (5). Alternatively, materialist theories of politics or agency animate matter of all kinds as agentic, and are open to new ways of thinking about locations and capacities for agency in human beings and the material world. See Coole and Frost.
4. These debates were triggered in particular by asylum seekers' claims of mistreatment by Australian government personnel and the turn-back strategy. See "Asylum seekers."
5. These other genres of testimonial coexist and circulate in popular media alongside this perverse testimony. For example, at Easter 2014 a poem by detainees held on Manus Island uses the Christian festival of Palm Sunday to invoke humanitarian recognition ("Letter and Poem"). This was remediated into a graphic narrative by First Dog on the Moon.
6. The concept of "metrics of authenticity" is introduced by Smith and Watson as a way of assessing the effects of authenticity in testimonial narrative.
7. The term "borderscapes" approaches borders as mobile, perspectival, and relational: "from this entry point we study practices, performances and discourses that seek to capture, contain, and instrumentally use the border to affix a dominant spatiality, temporality, and political agency" (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr x).
8. For a more extensive discussion of cycles and events in transactions of testimony see my *Postcolonial Life Narratives*.
9. On the announcement of these new border operations, see Travis. In the spring of 2015 an unprecedented exodus of asylum seekers from Libya and the loss of 750 lives in one shipwreck alone renewed debates about Operation Triton and the ethics of hospitality.

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