



Detention Camps/ Centers as Haunted Spaces in Behrouz Bocchani's No Friend But the Mountains

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political implications of the strategies of 'hauntology' committed against Asylum Seekers by Australian officers in Detention centers on Manus Islands in Behrouz Bocchani's No Friend But the Mountains result in dehumanization of asylum seekers. My argument is premised on the haunting strategies of Australian state that aim to traumatize the asylum seekers to the extent that they turn out to be unrecognizable bodies. Drawing on Avery Gordon Theory of Hauntology, Kristeva's concept of Abjection and Mary Ellen's concept of Doppelganger, I will discuss the ways in which 'horrific' violence inflicted on Asylum seekers in detention centers not only erase their individuality but leave them as dirty and disgusted bodies. This study aims to highlight different aspects of "horror" and 'abjection' articulated in the text through the vocabulary, incidents and landscape to present an alternative avenue of investigation of dehumanization in detention centers.

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1. Introduction

The border is a key geographical concept that deals with mobility and identity. It plays an important role in distinctions between self and other (or purity and danger) and in processes of inclusion and exclusion within or between groups. Like socio-cultural borders and processes, physical borders also play a highly important role in reflecting and reproducing geographies of inclusion and exclusion. These borders are "real" and "ideological" notions of boundaries that are characterized as "security fences", "walls" and "anti-terrorist fences". These borders express the state sovereignty and security. Natalie Konopinski explores the ethnography of Security checks and guards and looks at the ways physical borders and their difference-making practices may generate different temporalities. She explains that these check points involve in the 'regulation of potentially threatening movement' and the reinforcing of ethno-national differentiation (60). As a result, the border crossing alters, reaffirms, or even constitutes the identities of border crosser. Border can be conceived as state instrument to exercise sovereignty by managing and controlling migration. For many migrants, crossing the border is connected to devaluation and exploitation due to discrimination, cultural exclusion and non-recognition. Migrants who cross borders without the state permission are even called as criminals. H. Lefebvre has argued that the contemporary state is not a democratic institution but in reality, it acts in the interest of few people. State excludes the border crosser or migrants in an undemocratic manner. In the contemporary times, Industrialized and developed countries have applied restrictive measures to control border crossing and deter people from seeking asylum. As the number of refugees and asylum seekers escalates worldwide, to counter this increase the industrialized countries have applied increasingly restrictive measures. They use strategies like the use of immigration detentions, tougher refugee determination procedures and temporary forms of protection to counter this problem. In many countries like Australia, people have to wait for their refugee claims to be processed. In addition, they encounter many restrictions to access work, job, welfare support while seeking asylum and living in Australian community.

2. Literature Review

In this paper, the focus is on the 'horrific' experiences of the people seeking asylum who arrived in Australia by boat and are placed in detention centers in Australia and wait for their refugee claims to be processed. Through a case study of Bocchani's *No Friends But the Mountains*, the study examines the 'horrific' experiences of asylum seekers in detention centers and how these Australian detentions camps turn out to be 'haunted spaces' where asylum seekers are treated as "abject bodies". The aim of the study is to examine how the political implication of "haunted space" equates asylum seekers to "non-human", "dirt" and "disgust" bodies that they fail to elicit any empathy in spectators. Given the scope of this essay, the study is not based on interconnections between geo-politics and necro-politics as much has already been said about this. Freud defined horror as "uncanny", which arouses dread and horror. As a result, certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening. He explains it as a state in which a strange and anxious feeling sometimes created by familiar objects in 'unfamiliar' contexts. This idea is different from terror as terror pushes bodies or lives into motion to stay alive but "horrific" violence freezes the body or action. In this context this study prefers the word "horror" instead of "terror". In the beginning of the book, the narrator elaborates that he has to mustered the courage to board one of those boats headed in the direction of Australia. He explains that the people do not "have the slightest impression of the extreme danger that awaited them on journey" (97). For him this journey is "uncanny longing to launch into another odyssey, a passion fused with fear" (97). Even he confesses that the second time if he will board on boat, his 'legs tremble; an unyielding nausea" will "fester in my guts" and "harrowing anxiety" will take over me. (97). The narrator expresses 'horror' and represents the incident of boarding as 'unfamiliar'.

Anthony Vidler in "The Architecture of the Uncanny: The unhomely houses of the Romantic Sublime" states "The haunted spaces depiction in fairy tales, in horror stories, in Gothic novels, give rise to a genre of writing unique in itself, one that is preoccupied with the "un- canny" (17). In the book Manus Prison is presented as "haunted space" for the asylum seekers. During their journey towards Manus Island, a nurse warns them that 'Manus is a dangerous island with tropical and murderous mosquitoes" and further explains that 'if we were in your place, we would fill out the voluntary deportation forms and go back to our homeland" (110). Manus Island is represented as "sizeable area with large white tents set up in the center, and fences that besiege the prison from every side. A melancholic silence. Not even a bird flies past this place." (126). Alison Mountz in "The enforcement archipelago: Detention, haunting, and asylum on islands" explains that bodies and identities of asylum seekers are contained and regulated in the name of border enforcement, national security and geopolitical imperatives. She further adds that in such situations haunting does analytical work because it captures the mobility of sovereign power. The narrator explains that when they exit the vehicle, they "are all let into cage" (128). They "just shut the gates and secure them with a few strong locks" (128). After they shut the doors of prison, the officer reads out the script about Manus and life on the Island. The officer warns that they have to respect the laws of the Island and if they will not follow the rules of detention center, they will be taken to court and imprisoned. It shows that 'unambiguous threat" of Sovereign power in the form of haunt prevails in the place. To establish the power-dynamics in detention centers, they educate the asylum seekers the rules of new haunted place. (128).

Avery Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, conceptualizes haunting as the effects of systems of power as they manifest in daily life, especially where they seem to have disappeared. In 'The Kyriarchal System' we can see haunting as the "effect of system" and the big boss is apparently disappeared. As the narrator states, "Fear is an extraordinary force for motivating people" and it pushes people to "hurry up and determines their direction. Fear: a mountain of ice that has almost completely disappeared under water – the mother of all tortures" (170). Throughout the text Manus Prison is presented as 'dark place", "hot like hell", "a faraway island" (121), a land that 'scare us" (123), "a cage, like a hive full of bees" (140). "a place of dark shadows" (147), a place that possesses "corpse" (116), a place of "horror", "deep hopelessness" and holds the "nightmares" (162). Gordon explains that 'Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. As she states, "I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view" (27). Bocchani explains that after entering to this prison, we are at the point of no return but we have no way forward. (98). This uncertain situation and disappearance of the future create haunt in the mind of the characters in Manus Prison. He further

explains that it's a different place where his body smells like sludge. He has not eaten a proper meal for the entire time. There is stress everywhere, there is a stress of being "sent to prison, the stress of potentially being deported to Iran. There is always a struggle with death" (115). Manus Prison is unfamiliar, fearful and haunted place for asylum seekers.

3. Methodology

This 'unfamiliarity' to home is an idea in contrast to the "belonging" aspect of citizenship and having rights and privileges as a citizen. It gives an idea of "the abject", those people who are "worthless, despicable, low in estimation, without hope and regard". The word "abject" is derived from Latin word '*abjicere*' means 'to throw away'. Julia Kristeva's *Power of Horror* and Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* elaborate the term that not only signals 'exclusion' or 'outsider' but also highlight political misrecognition of 'other', whose presence is denied. Peter Nyers, in his article on 'Abject Cosmopolitanism' explains abject as an idea appears as stark contrast to belonging/ exclusion and everywhere/nowhere. Nyers further sees refugees and immigrants as abject categories. Building on Kristeva's Understanding of the abject, those who are on the periphery of society become waste and expelled because they are repulsive and useless. They are called to be "out-of-placeness", outsider, stranger and foreigners. In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva has affirmed Douglas' argument that 'dirt is matter out of place'. She asserts that it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (9).

4. Discussion

The abjection threatens the boundaries between subject and object. In *No Friends but the Mountains*, the writer has used the term 'meat' to describe himself and other asylum seekers. As he states, 'I am a piece of meat thrown into an unknown land; a prison of filth and heat' (140). In the same way he explains the other prisons as meat too. He says, 'The prisoners are a confrontation of bodies, a confrontation of human flesh' (141). In another occasion he calls prison as meat as he says, "The prison is a piece of meat with a mind that is always moving between the darkest, dullest and most worn-out scenes" (149). He elaborates the condition of the prisoners as "prisoners are like pieces of meat in a metal pressure-cooker" (167). Equating asylum seekers to 'meat' presents the idea of abjection. Abjection involves greater levels of disgust, and fear of contamination. Throughout the text, the narrator uses the words like 'dirt', "decay", "sweat" and "smell" again and again to express the disgust and dirt in detention centers of Australia. He presents himself as abject-body by saying, "I am exhausted. I am frustrated. Sweat spouts from every pore." (126). The old woman is also drenched in sweat in Prison as "Sweat flows through all the furrows and wrinkles on her face and neck. The sweat runs all the way down into a larger trench around her lower neck, and it continues to slide down between her large wrinkled breasts" (127).

"Smell" is another metaphor for abject- landscape used in the text to show the repulsive sense of prison and prisoners in Manus Island. As he states, "Inside it smells like sludge because the cement floor is full of potholes and the soil is moist . . . that smell of putrid soil mixed with the smell of the prisoners' horrible breath. A chemical brew of two disgusting smells, together with the stench of the sewage trough that passes alongside the room. The atmosphere is suffocating. It's better for one to live among the rubbish than to live in a place that smells like this" (174). In the same way he elaborates, "The smell is so vile that one feels ashamed to be part of the human species" (192). Kristeva's theory of abjection highlights the ambivalent nature of disgust. We can find the disgusting places in the Manus Prison like toilets and filthy hospital. As the toilets are so filthy that the toilet space has extended along the ground for a few meters. The toxic water of filthy toilets has seeped into the surrounding area, "penetrating the space where various species of plants are growing". (175). It presents the filthy and disgusting toilet spaces. These filthy toilets further caused this youth and many others to piss wherever they wanted. They used to piss in the bushes, big clusters of plants covered with yellow and red blossoms. The most disgusting thing is that people "pissing on flowers" (180). Even the prisoners have faces "full of hairs", waiting in line for food, "waiting in line for toilet" (180). In Manus Prison "the site is filthy and the clinics makes a ridiculous attempt to look like a hospital " (303). In the study of disgust, Miller in *The Anatomy of Disgust* discusses that the combination of disgust and a high degree of fear results in horror (Miller 26). Bocchani shows the dehumanization of the asylum seekers by presenting the Manus Prison as zoo "full of animals of different colours and

scents. For a whole month these animals – these men – have been crammed side-by side in a cage with dirt floors” (141). This expression highlights the dehumanization, horror and disgust in the detention centers.

According to Noel Carroll, "monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge. ...monsters are in a certain sense, challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking"(40). In the same way Carroll explains this phenomenon as:

We, like the characters in horror fictions, would feel distressingly helpless; for such creatures, insofar as they defy our conceptual scheme, would leave us at a loss to think of how to deal with them – they would baffle our practical response, paralyzing us in terror ... However, with art-horror, it is only the thought of the creature that is at issue; we know that it does not exist; we are not taxed literally by practical questions about what is to be done. So the fearsome and loathsome aspects of the monsters do not impinge upon us with the same practical urgency, allowing a space for fascination to take root. (Carroll 40). Following Carroll, the study examines that the characters in the haunted spaces think themselves as 'strangers' and get numbers for their identity instead of names. In this context, Mary Ellen elaborates the idea of identity and "spilt self" through the concept of "doppelganger". Mary Ellen defines doppelganger as "the twin, shadow double, demon double, and split self. For Bocchani, seeing him as ghostlike or "meat" is his deteriorated image in his eyes where he is removed from his previous image of a human being. It is not a simple identification and mirroring of the reflected self image. As narrator shows his identity by saying that, "they call out my number: MEG45. Slowly but surely, I must get used to that number. From their perspective, we are nothing more than numbers. I will have to forget about my name" (118). Further he shows his split self by saying that he has forced to tow this stupid number around with him everywhere. Even he is unable to relate this number to his identity and then he realizes that the only thing that he can relate is the end of World War II "the year 45". He shows his deteriorated image as he states, "Regardless of who I am, regardless of what I think, they are going to call me by that number" (119). He has abandoned his conception of him as a human being, and his new consciousness has filled him with disgust and his own previous image of self becomes unattainable. Ironically, the reflected image has intimate bonding with his inner self, but it makes him his own other. And eventually to dilute this empowering potential of the other image, as he states, " No matter who I am, no matter how I think, in these clothes I have been transformed into someone else" (119).

The trope of the doppelganger facilitates to lay bare the inner workings of troubled psyches. In the same way all the characters in the detention center are afraid of their own shadows. The similar concept has been presented by Julian Wolfreys, "There is no house without haunting. The house does not come to be haunted. Instead, haunting is the condition out of which the sense of the house manifests itself". The haunted house of detention center is like a cave for him as he states, "We are bats in a dark cave that react to the slightest vibrations" (143). The use of mirror leads to an important gothic tradition of doppelganger. We can see Bocchani's double image when he used to imagine himself as conquered person who "conquered this great expanse of ocean on a rotting boat, the same person who crossed this infinite volume of water". He feels a "kind of victory" because he can now look down at sea and "smile". But at the same moment a "powerful force from deep within the spirit" combats his weakness and moments of weakness. He at once feels that he is no more the same person 'who just minutes ago was looking for a hole to crawl into, looking for anything to crawl into" (147). In the same way he presents his spilt self as migrant and asylum seeker as he is "stuck in a balancing act, existing between two different worlds". In addition, "The violence of the prison is bizarre and novel." They have been thrown onto a "remote island." They are still "plagued by memories of the traumatic boat journey that stank of death". They are "distracted and can't do a thing to recover". He expresses his deteriorated image in these words, "I feel that I am being taken over by multiple personalities: sometimes blue thoughts parade through my head, and sometimes grey thoughts. Other times my thoughts are colourblind" (148).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, horror (hauntology) and disgust (abjection) are different forms of violence that do not merely aim at killing human life as so many characters in the detention centers take away their lives, but eradicate their subjectivities and identities and transform them as "double self" or "spilt self" (doppelganger). Judith Butler points out: 'if violence is done against those who

are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated' (33). When Butler argues that 'if certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are [neither] lived nor lost in the full sense' (1). This is what being done in detention camps to asylum seekers that their identity, social and political reality have been denied through haunted environment in a separate Island and transform them as unrecognizable dirty disgusted bodies. In this sense the very idea of being human is challenged through the dehumanization or inhuman conditions in prisons. In *No Friends but the Mountains*, the narrator explains the only reason for this dehumanization is that "they invaded [their] country by boat" (157). This makes these "imprisoned refugees" as "enemies", "cold, barbaric [and] hateful" (157). As the narrator states, "Hatred runs through every prisoner. In the prison, hatred makes prisoners more insular. The weight of hatred is so intense that the prisoners will suddenly collapse on a dark night and give up resisting . . . surrender to a system that induces and amplifies hatred . . . and accept refoulement. This basic aim reflects" (179). These haunted spaces/ camps are designed to hate and an attack on humanity and a violation of human rights, democratic values and morality.

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