Dr Suzie Gibson's Unpublished

Derrida and the Refugee; or, Not Being-at-Home

The concept of home, of having a home, and of not having a home preoccupied the thought of Jacques Derrida. Home is representative of many things: it could be a place, a language, a culture, a house, a nation-state, or even a state of mind. Ultimately, the question of home is also about one's sense of self and the place one occupies in the field of existence. The importance of home in locating, and, to a degree in defining one's self, becomes urgent once jeopardized. The kind of trauma involved in losing one's home and self-hood can be so profound that it has the capacity to shake the very foundations of our existence. The desire to protect one's self and home from harm, threat, or invasion is instinctual, even primeval but is sadly too often done at the cost of others. In a present-day age where there are countless refugees because their homes have been destroyed by war, climate change, or other disastrous events, sovereign nation-states are too ready to ignore their need for asylum. In fact we are living in a world where a first world media demonizes foreigners as potential terrorists who threaten the safety of citizens and nation-states. We are living in a dangerous world made all-the more dangerous where difference is demonized. By closing our selves, homes, and countries off to the call of others what we are in fact doing is eroding the important space of difference that makes our identity complex and alive. The dream of sameness or self-identity is a narcissistic fantasy that erases both self and other in its encircling gaze.

Difference is an extremely important concept to Derrida because it mediates relationships, including our relationships to justice, hospitality, and democracy— principles that again should not be made self-identical, self-same, or self-present in that their efficacy lies in their fluidity and lack of place.[1] Although Derrida's thinking is critical of desires that pursue self-presence, his own thinking is not exempt from desire as his insistent hope for a generous democracy to come conjures a future full of promise.

[1] Owen Ware's essay, "Dialectic of the Past/Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of Messianism," *JCRT* (5.2 April 2004) makes the important point that the "law is always algebraic, centered on an economy of rules, restitution, divestiture, appropriation, and all the totalizing norms of representation that rest on self-presence...Justice, on the other hand, is impossible, not in a negative sense, but in the sense that it can never have self- presence," p. 107. According to Ware, it is crucial that justice remains unfixed in order to avoid the "totalizing norms" of the law.

The illumination of Derrida's call for an unprecedented democracy to come asks us venture to a no-place (*oú tópos*) that is yet to be charted. The tantalizing promise of "to come" lingers on the threshold of idealism as we wait for the advent of an unconditional democracy that might just arrive.

This essay does a number of things. First it examines Derrida's experience of displacement as an Algerian Jew at a time when France's sovereignty over Algeria was powerful enough to disrupt his sense of home and identity. Secondly it addresses the urgent issue of homelessness in a present-day where refugees are vulnerable to the laws and powers of sovereign nation-states, including modern democracies. Thirdly it considers an extreme example of injustice where asylum-seekers are imprisoned in detention centres despite the fact that they have not broken any laws. And finally, the essay questions if Derrida's desire for a more open and liberal democracy to come is possible in a contemporary world where the rights of individuals are constantly violated.

Derrida and Algeria

As an Algerian Jew, Derrida's childhood experience of being denied French citizenship gave in him an early taste of injustice, and a memorable experience of exclusion. As he writes in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*:

> I was very young at the time, and I certainly did not understand it very well—what citizenship and loss of citizenship *meant to say*. But I do not doubt that exclusion—from school reserved for young French citizens—could have a relationship to the disorder of identity…I do not doubt either that such "exclusions" come to leave their mark upon this belonging or non-belonging *of* language, this affiliation *to* language.[2]

Derrida's reference to the "disorder of identity" expresses the fragile nature of belonging once it is severed from the rights and protections of citizenship. Derrida goes on to question the connection between language and identity since his exclusion made him aware of the "non-belonging *of* language". Certainly, language's relationship to the visible and invisible world of phenomena is culturally determined and arbitrary. And as such one's sense of belonging to language is not naturally given but culturally determined. In this way, language's affiliation with, and development through culture

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 16-17.

will always be vulnerable to imperial forces, sovereign states, or domineering powers that have the ability to marginalise or take away one's home, language, culture, and identity. Derrida takes this idea a step further in questioning whether language can be owned by anyone or anything, and in particular by itself in order to then be disowned or dispossessed:

> But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being-at-home [*etre-chex-soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning?[3]

Lack of belonging is what Derrida describes here when he questions if language can be in possession of itself. However, as a shared cultural, translatable, and literary phenomenon, language also has the power to imaginatively and psychologically install individuals and communities into worlds, mind-states, and cultures that cross the borders of their homes, times, places, and cultures. Derrida's childhood experience of being barred from French schools and citizenship rights provided a lasting impression of France's sovereignty over Algeria, and a knowledge of how easy it was for a state power to rupture his sense of belonging and identity.

In *A Taste for the Secret* Derrida's mentions again the significance of his exclusion:

> French is the only mother tongue I have, but while still a child I had a vague sensation that this language was not really my own. This was not just because I belonged to a Jewish family, of Spain origin, present in Algeria even before French colonization, but also because ever since I started school—so here begins my 'intellectual biography'—and from the very beginning the manner in which the French language was taught, the norms of 'proper' speaking and writing, the references to literature, all made it pretty clear that the model was in France—and not just in France but in Paris. So I had the feeling that this language, which was the only one I had, came from somewhere else. And the time when I was excluded from school must have aggravated my feeling of extraneousness and exteriority, of not belonging.[4]

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[3] Ibid., p.17.

[4] Jacques Derrida and Marurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*. Translated from the French and Italian by Giacomo Donis. Edited by Giamoco Donis and David Webb. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) p. 38.

Derrida's description here of being taught the "the norms of 'proper' speaking and writing" where France was the model for all literature and culture reveals his alienation from a language that "came from somewhere else." In particular being inculcated in the Parisienne manner of speaking and writing exacerbated feelings of "not belonging." With this in mind, Derrida's repeated concern in thinking otherness and difference is perhaps motivated by his own feelings of "extraneousness and exteriority." In the *Politics of Friendship* Derrida's exteriority is expressed again except in a different way when he argues that his book sets

> itself up to *work and be worked relentlessly*, close to the thing called France. And close to the singular alliance linking nothing less than the history of fraternization to this thing, France—to the State, the nation, the politics, the culture, literature and language which answer for the name 'France' and, when they are called by this name, answer it.[5]

Here France is not an alluring cultural centre but a monolithic State and object thing. Although Derrida acknowledges his "fraternization to this thing" he calls France and all that it entails—its culture, history, politics, literature and language—he also distances himself from its power. This is made even more clear when he asserts that *Politics of Friendship* is "not written only in French, for this would be to claim for French the exemplary privilege of translation of all other idioms, and that of remaining the only point of passage for all conversations."[6] No longer a dispossessed Algerian but an influential writer and thinker, Derrida is independent enough to question his connection to France.

David Carroll's essay on the "'Remains' of Algeria: Justice, Hospitality, Politics" argues that what survives of Derrida's experience of Algeria is a lasting obligation to justice, especially when it concerns the rights of the colonized.[7] He reasons that vestiges of Algeria can be traced in Derrida's writings where it is not just something that can be read into his work, but also felt since it is about his "identification with the plight of those who are treated by the state as inferior, alien, and threatening."[8] Derrida's political and philosophical commitment is therefore not just theoretical, but also deeply personal.

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[5] *Politics of Friendship*, p. 264.
[6] Ibid., p. 263.
[7] David Carroll, "'Remains' of Algeria: Justice, Hospitality, Politics," *MLN* 122 2007, p. 907.
[8] Ibid.

In this way it is not surprising that his writings are repeatedly concerned with questioning the unquestionable rights, powers, and laws of sovereign nation-states. It is also telling he has always been open to the call of marginal ideas and voices that challenge conventional thinking and the law.

Deconstruction, Justice, and the Law

As an outsider Derrida analysed many myths that revolved around concepts of nationalism and identity. Importantly his writings on foreigners and refugees are passionate in their examination of the imposed divisions between body politics and human bodies. Justice is at the heart of his thinking. In fact justice is proffered as the reason for deconstruction. As Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney argue, Derrida's concerns for refugee rights "is proof, if proof were needed, that deconstruction is not some obscure textual operation intimated in a mandarin prose style, but is a concrete intervention in contexts that is governed by an undeconstructable concern for justice."[9]

In the "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority" Derrida makes the telling remark that "deconstruction is justice."[10] Such a statement is supported by the idea that as a non-systematic movement of questioning, deconstruction is driven by the desire to re-examine laws and institutions whose powers are imposed unjustly and violently. What Derrida's essay puts into question is the very authority of laws whose existence and efficacy is bound up with their enforceability. In questioning the foundations of the law's authority, what comes to mind is Eduardo Cadava's insightful claim that what we have "inherited from Derrida is the obligation to think about the nature of inheritance…that does not invent inheritance" in opening up the "unconditional right to ask critical questions, even about the form and authority of these questions."[11] The inventive and mystical nature of the law's heritage and inheritance is rigorously explored in the "Force of Law" where Derrida not only exposes the law's alienation from justice, but more disturbingly, its alliance with power and domination. Importantly, Derrida asserts, "justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond

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[9] Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, "Preface," *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. viii.

[10] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Ed., Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfield and David Carlson. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

[11] Eduardo Cadava, "Forum: The Legacy of Jacques Derrida," *PMLA*, 120.2 (2005) p. 472.

law, is not deconstructible."[12] Not being deconstructible, justice becomes a reason for deconstruction in its conscientious desire to question the very foundations of the law's authority.

Like language, the law is another cultural phenomenon that has no basis in nature, except perhaps as an originary form of violence. And, like language, the law is neither stable nor stagnant enough to be owned or possessed since it is always undergoing amendment in accordance with the needs, desires, or purposes of powerful nation-states, groups, or individuals. The law's flexibility does not render it impotent; on the contrary it enables it to be all the more unaccountable and sovereign in protecting the rights and desires of law-makers and law-enforces, who in turn represent and protect the rights and desires of the powerful. Or, perhaps more alarmingly, it is the powerful who make, re-write and enforce the laws. As long as the law operates as an effective instrument of domination, then its origin in either nature or convention or both is hardly pressing or relevant. Thus the idea that the law is the law on the basis that it is enforceable suggests that it can be used for any or no purpose at all, except perhaps as an exercise in power itself. The reality that domineering groups, nation-states, or individuals can and do impose laws upon the less powerful opens up a chasm between justice and the law. The law's existence, viability, and relevance founded upon its enforceability renders its authority questionable and even mystical.

However, there is of course nothing mystical about the treatment, or to be more precise, maltreatment, of refugees. Derrida is very conscious of this, and his thinking is urgent in its desire to question the very laws and regulations that deny refugees asylum. In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* Derrida describes a disturbing situation in Europe where stateless people are disowned and dispossessed by a European Union that avoids the responsibility of giving them aid: "Asylum-seekers knock successively on each of the doors of the European Union states and end up being repelled at each one them…Even when they do so in the form of an explicit and reasoned (*motivée*) juridical response, they often leave it to their police to enforce the law."[13] Derrida's description of where refugees are callously rejected is even more disturbing to read now when Europe's major economic crisis, imposition of austerity measures, and the resultant

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[12] Derrida, "Force of Law," p. 14.

[13] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, first published in French as "Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!" in 1997. The edition used here is the fourth reprint and Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes are the translators, and Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney wrote the preface. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13.

supremacy of economic concerns over and above the welfare of both citizens and non-citizens, means that the treatment of refugees is likely to be even more inhospitable. He also reveals that since the revolution in the eighteenth century when birth rates declined, France's reputation for being "liberal in matters of immigration" were motivated purely by "obvious economic reasons."[14]

In a present-day where the economic situation across Europe is dire, the acceptance of refugees would be more stringent and narrowly assessed along the lines of their economic worth and contributions. According to Derrida, genuine kindness and hospitality have not existed in France's immigration policies since the eighteenth century. He goes on to provide an unsettling example of where a Kurdish individual who gained legal asylum by a French tribunal was still "deported to Turkey by the police without a single protest."[15] Such an instance of where a refugee is given the right to asylum by a French court and yet in spite of this is still shipped back to Turkey is exemplary of the groundless enforceability of law where might alone enables it to act unlawfully. Importantly, Derrida reveals how the "so-called civilised states" of the European Union "*make the law*, instead of simply contenting themselves with applying it and seeing that it is observed."[16]

There is another, perhaps even more upsetting contemporary example of the law's injustice. In 2011, a young Sri Lankan man committed suicide in an Australian detention centre despite the fact that he was granted refugee status. He committed suicide because for nearly two years he was imprisoned, and even after being given refugee status, he was kept in detention. The fact that the Australian government imposes mandatory detention on asylum-seekers means that they are locked away for an indefinite term in what Mungo MacCallum describes as prison camps while bureaucrats determine the validity of their refugee claims.[17] It seems that even when their refugee status is granted, it does not lead to their immediate release—in the case of the young Sri Lankan man it led to his death. Australia's mandatory detention policy goes beyond what Derrida considers inhospitality in that it reaches into darker sphere of intolerance that anyone could have imagined.

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[14] Ibid., p.10.
[15] Ibid., pp. 13-14.
[16] Ibid., p. 14.
[17] Mungo MacCallum, "Girt By Sea: Australia, the Refugees and the Politics of Fear," *Four Classic Quarterly Essays On the Australian Story* (Melbourne: Black Inc Books, 2006) p. 178.

Not-Being-At-Home

The pain and suffering of losing one's home can be the result of a number of forces. First, home could be taken away by a hurricane or other terrible weather events (once considered acts of God but now more likely events fostered by humanity's impact upon the global environment). Second, one might lose one's home due to human-made disasters such as war, religious upheaval or fiscal disaster. Significantly, it is what happens after one loses one's home that one's sense of belonging becomes important since this is when the fragile nature of home, and by extension of our identity, is made visible.

If identity is connected to where we are born, where we live, and how we live, then it is vulnerable to events and circumstances beyond the scope of individual and collective control. For example, one could be born into poverty, live in a war-torn country, or on a sinking island. Often, there is no choice in the matter of one's home and the manner in which one lives. The overarching factors of time and place expose the myth of the independent, self-determining subject who overcomes all obstacles in the pursuit of self-identity, wholeness, and belonging. Eduardo Cadava makes the telling point about Derrida's belief that "nothing ever happens in isolation" since identity can never be "self-identical" because that would "refuse its relation to others."[18] The idea of one's "relation to others" not only refers to one's connections to other people or individuals, it also includes one's relationships to society, culture, living conditions, and place in the world. Such factors not only determine the nature of one's relations, they also mean that one can never achieve self-identity since our subjectivities are formed and mediated through our differences from others, cultures, landscapes, and the world in general.

Homes as countries, lands, houses, peoples, cultures or languages are always vulnerable to the effects and vicissitudes of time and place because these things are material, ephemeral and finite. In many ways, we are all tenants or temporary passengers in our countries, cities, homes, and bodies since death puts an end to all things. The countless graves around the world as homes of mourning are also not immune to the effects of erosion, re-development, decay, and eventual disappearance. Also the fact that oppressive, imperialist, and capitalistic nation-states, regimes, and

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[18] Eduardo Cadava, "Forum: The Legacy of Jacques Derrida," p. 472.

corporations have displaced, bankrupted or invaded communities, cultures, and countries is further evidence of the fragile and impermanent nature of home and its connection to our identity.

Taking it further, if home and identity are more than about where we live and how we live, but inclusive of what we own and disown, think and cannot think, believe and disbelieve, speak and cannot speak, then these are both visible and invisible, material and immaterial. As such identity as home, and home as identity, is still not safe from invading or influential forces since what we own, think and believe is not invulnerable to manipulation and impermanence. In worse case scenarios, when one country or culture invades or annihilates another country or culture then the connections between home, place and identity can be permanently severed, leaving individuals and communities homeless, stateless, even nonexistent. If our homes, countries, bodies, languages, and ideas can be taken over, controlled or eliminated then what is destroyed is cultural difference, religious difference, racial difference, language difference—difference altogether. Genocide is a crime against humanity but it is a transgression that has happened many times over.

The fact that terrible weather events, oppressive governments and countless wars have created innumerable refugees does not guarantee their political asylum. As Derrida writes in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, "the right to political asylum is less and less respected both in France and Europe."[19] The maltreatment of refugees has gone further than disrespect, for not only have their legal rights been ignored in some countries, but more disturbingly their very identities have been misused by political and media forces seeking to dehumanise them, and more appallingly, misrepresent them as potential terrorists.[20]

Three Solutions
Three solutions offered in three different historical periods, by three different politicians in different countries are similarly motivated: to solve the problem of undesirables. The first arguably goes down in history as the most infamous—it is Hitler's promise to provide a final solution to the Jewish question. Decades later, one of

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[19] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 9.
[20] See again Mungo MacCallum's "Girt By Sea: Australia, the Refugees and the Politics of Fear" for a meticulous study of how asylum-seekers have been dehumanized and conflated with terrorists.

Australia's longest running Prime Ministers, John Howard, offered to deliver Australian voters with a Pacific solution to the refugee question. The Howard Government's border protection and asylum seeker policies developed out of a shameful episode in Australian political history when, in 2001, Afghan refugees on a sinking fishing vessel were denied access to Australian waters. Because the boat was clearly in trouble, a Norwegian freighter called the *MV Tampa* followed international naval law in rescuing the occupants of the distressed vessel. The Australian government responded in turn by denying the Norwegian ship permission—and thus flouting international law—to offload their passengers on Australian soil. Media footage of the event depicted hundreds of desperate adults and children trying to escape from the boat. At the time, the then Minister for Defence perpetuated the untrue story that adults in the boat were throwing their children overboard as a means of forcing their rescue. This led to a further falsehood: that people capable of drowning their own children were criminals capable of anything, up to and including acts of terrorism. Of course, images of children being held outside of the railings of the sinking vessel were in fact a desperate effort made by adults to save them. Nonetheless, such a lie though took hold in the Australian public's imagination. The lie should have gone down in history as one of the most shameful examples of media and governmental propaganda and racism—but it did not. Rather what it did do is ensure the incumbent Prime Minister Howard another term in office since after the 9/11 attacks voters were anxious about protecting Australian borders from invading boat people who were thought to be little more than criminals.

The Howard Government's inhospitality developed into a well-organised effort to imprison asylum seekers in detention camps located in isolated places such as Manus Island, Christmas Island, Papua Guinea, and Nauru. The official excuse for mandatory detention was to enable government authorities to determine whether asylum-seekers were genuine refugees. In the case of more than four hundred Afghan people on the Tampa boat, the question of whether they were refugees should have been self-evident since while Australian bureaucrats were determining their status, the government was preparing to deploy thousands of troops into Afghanistan in order to fight the Taliban. Clearly, the political decision to enforce mandatory detention operated as an unjust exercise in power that not only betrayed human rights laws, but also justice and truth.

Under a subsequent Australian federal government led by Labor Party Prime Minister Julia Gillard, voters have been offered with a Malaysian solution to the refugee question. Again the idea involved scuttling refugee boats off the Australian coastline in

an effort to prevent asylum seekers from gaining access to the mainland. It took a High Court ruling in Australia to veto the policy because Malaysia, unlike Australia, was not a signatory of the United Nations Convention on Refugees. Thus the human rights of the 800 asylum seekers could not be guaranteed. In this specific case of the High Court ruling, the force of the law proved to be right and just. Recently the Howard government's draconian policy of keeping asylum-seekers locked up and off-shore in such inhospitable places as Nauru Island has been re-embraced with even more severity where tents have been resurrected in providing substandard housing to vulnerable people. Despite the fact that Amnesty International has publically denounced the Nauru as a human rights violation it is nonetheless still operating as a nasty "solution" to the refugee problem.

Not dissimilar from Derrida's experience of being denied access to French schools and citizenship rights because France's sovereignty had the power to decide "it all by themselves" and implement "it all by themselves,"[21] so too is Australia exerting its sovereignty over vulnerable boat people by placing them in prison camps and on isolated islands until it decides their fates.

What is characteristic of all of the three solutions mentioned—Hitler's final, Howard's Pacific and Gillard's Malaysian—is that they all share in a political rhetoric that constructs people as problems that require solving. The dehumanisation of people begins once they are treated as problems, obstacles, or things that need solving. Yet the semantic and political links between one universally decried "solution"—Hitler's—and the latter two have so far gone largely unnoticed.

The Detention Centre as "Home"

Australia is one of very few countries in the world with a current policy of holding asylum seekers in mandatory detention. It is also—absurdly—a signatory to the very United Nations Convention on Refugees that contradicts its policy of mandatory detention.

Detention centres in Australia operate as concentration camps in that they are places installed in isolated areas that are difficult to access from the wider community and away from the media eye. Such "gulags" are fenced off with barbed wire and are policed by military-style guards. Children are held captive in these camps along with

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[21] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, p. 16.

adults, an obvious compromise of personal safety and a further breach of international law. The numerous suicides, attempted suicides, and cases self-harm that take place in these centres are further evidence of their extreme inhospitality.

However, perhaps all sense of hospitality is not lost as social workers, activists, pastoral careers, investigative journalists, and some politicians have tried to improve conditions, and even more importantly, get rid of them altogether. Many such people make long journeys to almost inaccessible places such as Christmas Island located in the Indian Ocean in providing detainees with some kind support. Human Rights professor Linda Briskman is one individual whose many visits to detention centers reveals that all guards wear uniforms, keep detainees under a constant state of surveillance, and never refer to them by their proper names but are instead identified as numbers, and sometimes even as "clients."[22]

The maltreatment and rejection of refugees coming by sea to Australia goes back to 1938 when a boatload of Jewish refugees escaping from Nazi Germany were rejected by the Australian government on the basis that it has " 'no racial problems…and no desire to import any.'"[23] Of course the glaring fact that Australia's original inhabitants in the nineteenth century and beyond were either massacred, or were systematically bred out was not even recognised as a racial problem. Australian Aborigines in the nineteenth century and into the early and late twentieth centuries were hardly considered citizens, let alone human beings, which have enabled their massacre, imprisonment, and general maltreatment by white society, the government, and legal authorities. In 1947 the Australian government rejected another boatload of Jewish post-war refugees.

In a present-day political and economic climate that is increasingly hostile to and suspicious of racial and religious difference, it seems that the borders between hospitality and inhospitality, justice and injustice will never be bridged. In such an uncompassionate world where the conflation of refugees with terrorists is too easy, it seems that justice and compassion are out of reach. Moreover, the language of homeless and stateless who often cannot speak in the same tongue as their host sovereign nations makes their acceptance all the more difficult. Misrepresented as invading aliens who cannot speak the same language as their unwilling hosts, refugees are treated worse

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[22] Professor Linda Briskman, Public Lecture: "Human Rights Betrayed: Asylum Seeker Policy in Australia." Delivered at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia, November 8th 2011.
[23] Mungo MacCallum, p. 158.

than uninvited guests, since the popular media and right wing factions misrepresent them as terrorists, or with the threat of terrorism.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida makes the point that the foreigner, "inept at speaking the language" [24] of his or her host country, is vulnerable to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. He argues that the translation and assimilation of the foreigner's native tongue into the language of the sovereign nation-state is a "first act of violence" [25] in that it changes the foreigner's idiom, which is also her or his culture, to fit that of the dominant power. Of course, as a general form of representation, language will always fall short of representing or housing our identities since it is ultimately symbolic, arbitrary, and in a state of perpetual flux. In this way, language operates both as a place and as a non-place in its fluidity and changeability. It also has the dual ability of connecting and disconnecting selves from others, things from words, and individuals from communities. As a medium of communication, it inscribes identity, culture, and belonging while at the same time also revealing our lack of these things. For Derrida, being at home and not being at home, belonging to language and not belonging to language co-exist in an uneasy and irreconcilable axis. The uncertainty of both having and not having a home, and by extension an identity and language, lies at the heart of his thinking since he questioned the very foundations of our culture, law, and language.

Certainly it is neither expected nor a requirement that sovereign nations be willing or good hosts. In the case of Australia, and also Derrida's childhood experience in Algeria, being inhospitable supports the sovereignty of nations in enabling them to exert their power. Interestingly, Derrida argues that extreme inhospitality, as violence, is the foundation or the founding act upon which "all Nation-States are born" since they all "have their origin in aggression of the *colonial* type." [26] It appears that even for Derrida the dream of a future generous hospitality and democracy where the borders of nation-states are opened up in a kind gesture of welcome is dampened by a violent past and a ruthless present that is inhospitable to the point of being contemptuous of refugees. The otherness and alienation of stateless and homeless people is intensified by punitive laws, media propaganda, and detention centres that alienate parents from children, husbands from wives, and damaged people from taking part in the community. If such

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[24] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 15.
[25] Ibid.
[26] *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 57.

people were not already traumatised, then their trauma is guaranteed by their mandatory incarceration in Australia.

Borderless Ideas

Derrida has always been concerned with the here and now of existence. This has made him both popular and an easy target for criticism. Perhaps Derrida's controversy is bound up with the idea that the grand philosophical questions to do with the nature of our existence and all that it entails: belonging, identity, culture, sovereignty, language, ethics, justice, war, power, survival and death, are not only considered within the field of philosophy, but are able to cross the borders into literature, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, theology, technology, and politics. Derrida has always been critical of divisions, whether they be disciplinary, conceptual, or physical in that they have the habit of preventing genuine questioning and hospitality. Perennial and important questions to do with our way of living, values, laws, ideals, and politics, and desires are not just philosophical concerns, but everyday issues that are experienced and expressed in and through bodies, individuals, cultures, communities, countries, languages, homes, even detention centres. Such difficult and profound questions are perhaps unanswerable in their vastness and complexity, and yet they dwelt within the heart of a thinker who was always wondering about the plight others, especially if they were stateless, homeless and destitute.

Derrida's philosophy could be described as borderless in its complex engagement with all manner and matter of texts, subjects, and ideas. Because there were no limits to his thinking, anything was possible. In *Of Hospitality* Derrida's imagination is given free reign when he considers the porous nature of our homes, selves and countries because of technological advancements. The idea that the borders of our homes and bodies are extended by digital technologies means that the boundaries between what is private and public are also blurred. This has a great impact on how we think of our selves and our homes. Of course the world of cyber-space, like any realm, is also not invulnerable to invasion and corruption. Perhaps though it is in the electronic spaces of the Internet that Derrida's dream of an unprecedented democracy can be realized. Part of this is bound up with the idea that the laws, boundaries and conventions of sovereign nation-states are yet to contain and control the Internet. Derrida is quite prophetic in suggesting that

the power of the Internet could make nation-states "suddenly smaller and weaker.[27] Certainly the Wikileaks phenomenon proved how the Internet could disrupt the sovereignty of nations in bringing to light war crimes they would have preferred hidden. Digital technologies not only promise new spaces of hospitality, they also operate as sites of political and social resistance.

The idea that technology may hold a key to our freedom has been around for a long time. As Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* reveals an early twentieth belief in its liberating powers: "There will still come the inevitable emancipation of humanity by technology, and its now irresistible consecration of life, namely the potential abolition of poverty."[28] Such confidence in technology's benevolence now comes across as naïve and quixotic. Of course after the Second World War, such faith turned into despair as we witnessed how well technology could kill on a grand scale. However, in spite of industrial technology's disappointment, the possibilities of present-day digital technologies are yet to be realized. Whether or not this means they will provide unconditional hospitability and democracy is doubtful. Only a portion of the world's population has Internet access as the very poor struggle to survive. The power and promise of digital technologies is only relevant to those who already have the means, the desire, and the wealth in which to participate. What is more, the borders between our homes and workplaces have become blurred by the omnipresence of email and the Internet to the point where we have not been liberated but rather further enslaved by technology.

Yet in spite of all this, the future-oriented nature of Derrida's thinking still carries the spirit of hope. This is especially conveyed in his repeated evocations of a democracy and a hospitality that is yet to come. As he asks at the end of the *Politics of Friendship*: "When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law…?"[29] Derrida's call to readiness inspires readers to be on the alert for a time when democracy's promise just might be kept. Such an attitude generated a kind of democracy that had already arrived, and not that was yet to come. But, sadly, Derrida's borderless and democratic cities of refuge lived only within his mind, for he knew too well that such ideas were not only impossible, but also likely utopian. Derrida admits this when he says

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[27] *Of Hospitality*, p. 57.
[28] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 267.
[29] *Politics of Friendship*, p. 306.

he "might appear utopian for a thousand reasons."[30] In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* the word "utopian" appears again when he asserts that he is not concerned with "developing neither an unjust nor utopian discourse"[31] but one which goes beyond their opposition. However, it is in the very notion of a beyond, of a future, and of a "to come" that the spirit of Derrida's utopianism is conveyed. This does not mean that he is a naïve or impractical, but what it does mean is that he pushes thinking beyond the limits of what can be thought.

Derrida's dream for an unprecedented, unconditional, and unlimited form of democracy, hospitality, and forgiveness is bound up with his desire to dismantle power's power. This means that all relationships need to be re-drawn in undoing the tight lacings of unequal dynamics and structures. Derrida strove to imagine a kind of democracy, hospitality and forgiveness that no longer put of an individual, a community or a nation-state in the dominant position of either administering goodwill and clemency, or in the servile position of receiving kindness and mercy. Unfortunately in the case of certain sovereign nation-states when hospitality is not offered, then the already vulnerable are further disempowered. Derrida may have sought to dismantle hierarchical, oppositional, and conflicting relationships in re-creating a world without power, but he also knew that such an undertaking was impossible. Power still exists in our relationships where there is indebtedness, responsibility, irresponsibility, as well as self-satisfaction and guilt in our giving and taking, and also in our not giving and not taking. The pure gift does not exist. However, Derrida's dream is still resilient in asking us to venture to the no-places of unconditional hospitality, democracy and forgiveness. At the end of *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* he describes his vision of a world without power as a form of "madness" that "is perhaps not so mad."[32]

The undiscoverable places of Derrida's unconditional democracy, hospitality and forgiveness are utopian no-places in their non-representation, non-location, and promise. Such no-places awaken the desire for future better places. Tellingly, the final words in the *Politics of Friendship* conclude with the hopeful ellipsis: "O my democratic friends…" which opens the conversation up and out to an unknown future where we just might be "ready for an experience of freedom and equality."[33]

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[30] *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 8.
[31] Ibid., p. 14.
[32] Ibid., p. 60.
[33] *Politics of Friendship*, p. 306.

If Derrida's philosophy had to be summed up then it is a philosophy for and about many different others: foreign peoples, alien ideas, and homeless desires that are yet to be located in our cultural centres, and settled into our comfortable homes. For now they exist as orphan dreams and desires that dwell at the margins of philosophy, culture, and literature. To be orphaned, stateless, mad, or in need of asylum is to experience the grim reality of homelessness, loneliness, and survival. If an open, generous, and uncompromised form of democracy, hospitality, and forgiveness ever existed, then it dwelled within in imagination of a visionary philosopher who died too young and who kept alive the dream of an unprecedented generosity that was always yet to come.

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