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Detention, Displacement and Dissent in Recent Australian Life Writing

In June 2010, two months prior to the Australian federal election, the community advocacy group GetUp! gained significant media coverage for refugee issues when it made the winning eBay bid for a surfing lesson with Australian Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and then donated that lesson to former Afghan refugee Riz Wakil. The novelty of a former refugee learning to surf with Tony Abbott, whose hard-line policies on illegally-arrived migrants and potential asylum seekers included a return to the Howard government policy of mandatory detention, proved irresistible to the media. Over the next several weeks, the story resulted in more than 50 interviews and \$500,000 worth of media exposure. By late July, GetUp had raised over \$130,000 to support the broadcast of an advertisement featuring Wakil speaking direct to camera, addressing Tony Abbott in advance of his surf lesson:

Mr Abbott, if you heard the stories of real refugees, you would know that tougher policies would not keep them from coming. Your approach will just bring them more pain. I had to flee Afghanistan when I was just eighteen, after my brother was kidnapped. I risked my life on a dangerous journey. There was no safe way to safety. Then I was locked up in Curtin Detention Centre, where I saw many terrible things. Now I'm a small business owner, a proud Australian and I look forward to meeting you Mr Abbott, to share my story and the stories of other refugees. Please Mr Abbott, listen to our stories. Make your policies more humane. (Get Up).¹

The return of refugee issues to public debate in the lead-up to, and over the course of, the 2010 Australian federal election is not surprising. In 2008 the Labor government had ended the previous Coalition government's policies of mandatory detention, Temporary Protection Visas, and the 'Pacific Solution'. Mandatory detention had resulted in thousands of asylum seekers held in detention centres, some for years, generating significant public protest, particularly in regard to children held in detention. Temporary Protection Visas allowed for a three year period of protection, with the need for protection then reassessed and asylum seekers potentially returned to their country of origin if it were deemed safe to do so. The 'Pacific Solution' saw unauthorised arrivals transferred to offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island, where claims for asylum were processed outside the jurisdiction of Australian law and claimants ineligible for legal assistance or for judicial review. In the period during which these policies were in place, arrivals of boats carrying illegal migrants to Australia had fallen significantly, from more than forty or fifty boats per year to less than ten.

¹ The video is now on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW5CdVXbXMM&feature=youtu.be>

In 2009, however, arrivals rose again to 59 boats for the year, with that same number arriving in just the first five months of 2010 (Boat Arrivals). In April 2009 an explosion on a boat carrying Afghan asylum seekers to Australian waters killed five asylum seekers. In October Australian Customs rescued 78 Sri Lankans from a disabled boat and returned them to Indonesian waters, leading to a month-long period of negotiation with the refugees who refused to leave the Australian ship. And in July 2010, with a change in Australian Prime Ministers and an election looming, the Labor government announced that it would begin negotiations with East Timor for the establishment of a regional refugee processing centre, a proposal seen by some as being Labor's version of the Coalition's Pacific Solution (Coorey).²

Refugee issues have been a factor in every Australian election over the past ten years. What is significant about Riz Wakil's media appearance is that by speaking directly to a viewing and a reading audience, as well as to the leader of the opposition, Wakil gives a name and a face to a debate often overwhelmed by statistics, or by images of degradation, violence and self-harm.³ In *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007) Gillian Whitlock argues that such personalisation is rare in refugee discourse. She makes the point that '[d]ehumanizing the figure of the asylum seeker, denying the human referent of face and body at all costs, is a response to threat: unwelcome strangers endanger the integrity of the nation' (73). Whitlock notes that there have been very few book-length biographies or autobiographies of recent refugees to Australia. In *Soft Weapons*, her analysis of refugee life writing focuses on the highly mediated, highly controlled textual platforms through which refugee narratives and testimony most frequently enter public circulation: activist and human rights websites such as those of Human Rights Watch, or Amnesty International, or anthologies edited and compiled with the support of groups such as PEN. She argues, however, that the testimony circulating in this way risks achieving little public impact. 'To accrue value and jurisdiction, testimony needs fortune, history and national interest on its side. Asylum seekers have none of these things' (79). Of greater impact, she claims, has been the strategy of adopting a 'wound culture' in which detained asylum seekers 'write graffiti in blood, carve words on skin, and speak with sutured lips' (83). Relatively few Australians will

² Since submitting this article, refugee issues have continued to make headlines in Australia, the most tragic event being the shipwreck of an asylum seeker vessel at Christmas Island in December 2010, with over 50 people drowning.

³ Compare Wakil's media presence to that of other former refugees such as Parviz Yousefi, the Iranian refugee who was among detainees at Woomera Detention Centre who sewed their lips together and joined in a hunger strike in protest at their treatment. In 2005, Yousefi lodged a claim with the NSW Supreme Court for compensation for wages and medical care owing to the psychiatric damage he had suffered in detention. Newspaper articles covering the 2008 success of his claim reported that he was 'too sick to comment' (Murphy).

have sought or read the refugee narratives appearing in publications Whitlock cites yet anyone watching the news in those same years will remember images of refugees with lips sewn together. For Whitlock, this too is testimony. She terms such acts of protest ‘testimony incarnate’ and argues that this performative testimony of ‘disgust and hate and shame’(85) confronts the viewer/reader in ways that narrative imagination cannot and does so with a force which ‘produces a shattering sense of the limits of our own self and its place to speak humanely’(86).

Riz Wakil’s autobiographical presence is not of this shattering kind. It is worth noting that Wakil’s story first appeared in the discourse surrounding refugee lives through one of the anthologies that Whitlock cites. In *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers, Aged 11-20 Years* (2004), fourteen-year-old writer Zac Darab bases his story, ‘From a Small Detention Centre, I Am Now in a Bigger Detention Centre: The Story of an Afghan Refugee,’ on conversations with Wakil, who at the time had been released from Curtin Detention Centre, at first on a Temporary Protection Visa, and later granted a Permanent Residency Visa. Darab recounts Wakil’s journey from Afghanistan to Australia, his experiences in detention, and his life in Australia following release. Wakil’s story in this publication was one among the many fragments of refugee narratives that, Whitlock argues, entered the public sphere through the efforts of advocacy groups. Whitlock emphasises, however, that despite the intentions of those involved – the advocates, editors, narrators and writers – these fragments of refugee and asylum seeker lives had little impact on the national psyche. Refugee stories in this form, Whitlock maintains ‘continue to languish on the margins of the public sphere’ (76).

Wakil’s story, however, has not languished. In fact, his story has appeared repeatedly in Australian media, beginning in 2003, again in 2004, in 2006, and now in 2010.⁴ While his narrative is frequently associated with the public campaigns of advocacy groups, it is nevertheless a refugee narrative very much embodied, and is one that has accrued some degree of familiarity in Australian consciousness. His story is one of displacement and of detention; his voice is one of dissent – not desperate, shocking, or shaming, but reasonable, personable – and one that seeks an empathetic engagement of the sort that Whitlock argues has had little impact. Whitlock may well be right, but what I would like to do in this essay is to examine two recent examples of Australian life writing texts that offer book-length accounts of the experiences of those who have fled repression in their countries of origin. As

⁴ See Stephen, Maley, Patty, and Harrison respectively. The media reports by Maley and Patty are cited in Helf, who provides a discussion of Wakil’s narrative, as written by Darab, and appearing in *Dark Dreams*.

previously noted, when Whitlock was writing *Soft Weapons*, there were very few monographs of refugee experiences relating to this most recent period of conflict and displacement. Certainly, numerous autobiographies and biographies have been published narrating the lives of those who came to Australia as refugees from Europe following the Second World War. There is also a significant body of auto/biographical narratives associated with the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, many of whom settled in Australia. The recent years of conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, however, have generated far fewer book-length autobiographical accounts by displaced people from that region who have come to Australia. Only a handful of such texts have been published. I would like to discuss two of these, as they illustrate a range of issues relating to the narration of dissent and its consequences. Both are first-person narratives written with the assistance of a professional writer and, therefore, the discursive constraints of collaborative textual production, as Whitlock insists in her analysis of refugee narratives, will warrant consideration in the discussion which follows.

Published in 2005, *Mahboba's Promise* provides a first-person account of events in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan of the 1980s. Although not a refugee narrative from the most recent round of violence and displacement, Mahboba Rawi's book appeared at a time when the Australian media were devoting considerable attention to Afghanistan. Rawi's book was the first in Australia to offer a personal account by a woman displaced from Afghanistan by conflict, albeit the conflict experienced two decades earlier. The first half of the book focuses on the circumstances leading to the narrator's involvement in student protests in Kabul, and her eventual experience of displacement in Pakistan. In the Australian-located second half, the narrative develops into one of migrant integration as Rawi struggles to overcome the challenges of adapting to a new culture and then personal loss and grief. In 1992, events in Rawi's life intersected with the Australian media following a family tragedy at Kiama on the south coast of New South Wales, when seven members of Sydney's Afghan migrant community were swept into the sea at the Blowhole, a well-known tourist attraction in the area. One of the victims was seven-year-old Arash, Rawi's son, who had gone sight-seeing that day with his aunt, uncle and cousin, all of whom were drowned. Rawi herself was not present and does not feature in the media reporting of the time, but she does appear in the media in 2001, when ABC Television's *7.30 Report* covered her involvement with English language programs for Afghan women in Sydney and her fund-raising for Afghan orphans in refugee camps in Pakistan. In 2002, she appeared on ABC Television's *Australian Story*, leading a group of Australian women into refugee camps in Pakistan, and into Afghanistan, to

draw attention to her ongoing fund-raising efforts for women and children affected by the war (Masters). This broadcast resulted in a huge increase in donations and volunteers for her aid organisation called Mahboba's Promise. In 2009, Rawi was back on the *7.30 Report*, again to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by Afghan women and orphans, and to maintain support for her organisation (Haussegger). Rawi's public presence and the reputation of her work is such that in January 2009, when Australian Governor-General Quentin Bryce made a secret two-day visit to Afghanistan to speak to Australian troops there, she found time to visit the Mahboba's Promise orphanage in Kabul (Dodd). The point I wish to emphasise is that Rawi's story is another example of a refugee narrative that, far from languishing on the margins of the public sphere, has had significant and tangible social impact, changing the lives of Afghans, who are receiving health, housing and educational assistance, and the lives of Australians who have been encouraged to volunteer and become involved in the circumstances and well-being of refugees. The book *Mahboba's Promise* has not, on its own, achieved this but is an integral part of this discursive network of circulation and narrative exchange.

But what role does dissent play in Rawi's story? It is important to point out that Rawi did not come to Australia as a refugee, although it *was* as a refugee that she had fled Afghanistan and she identifies herself throughout her narrative as a displaced person. Unlike Afghan refugees who arrived in Australia in the period following 2000, Rawi came here in the mid-1980s as a migrant, having married another Afghan who had Australian residency. In the years leading up to this, though, Rawi had lived as a refugee in Pakistan, having been forced to flee Kabul after being targeted for arrest by security forces. The opening chapters of *Mahboba's Promise* detail the circumstances leading to the narrator's decision to leave. During her years as a high-school student, Rawi became active in the student protest movement, painting banners with anti-Russian slogans (35), burning communist books from the school library (48), and forming links with protestors from other schools. Rawi's name was revealed to security forces and, on the same day, a crackdown at her school resulted in more students being taken into custody. Rawi escaped and went into hiding and her family then arranged for her to travel with relatives to Pakistan (56). This section of the book explains both the historical and political forces determining the course of the narrator's life and the formation of her character, as she responds to the challenges of living under military occupation and as a displaced person. Although dissent has altered the course of her life story, her assertion and determination – her father calls her 'his "sweet lion daughter"' (68) – are the very qualities that will draw others to her cause years later in Australia and lead to her

name being included in a list published in *The Age* newspaper of ‘the 50 Australians who matter’ (Dale).⁵

Not all refugee narratives are propelled by acts of dissent. *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* (2008) is the first-person narrative of Najaf Mazari, a Hazara man from Afghanistan. Its narrative provides an account of Mazari’s growing up in Afghanistan under the Soviet occupation and mujahedin resistance, and later, during conflict with the Taliban. During the earlier period, Mazari was seriously injured and members of his family were killed when their home was struck in a rocket attack. In the latter period, his city, Mazar-e-Sharif, was the site of a Taliban massacre of the Hazara population.⁶ During this violence, Mazari hid in a cupboard for fifteen days, and when he emerged, he was captured and imprisoned by the Taliban and tortured (196-202). Throughout the years of upheaval in Afghanistan, the persecution which Mazari and his family experience had no connection with dissent or protest. Their plight results solely from their ethnicity. The narrative reveals that throughout his life, Mazari has opted to avoid dissent wherever possible. His attitude is made clear early in the book when he relates a traditional story of an old camel and its son. The young camel was given to complaining until one day the old camel counsels the younger to look up towards the mountains ahead. ‘Come what may, we must climb those mountains. If you lament now, what will be left when the real work begins?’ (99). Later, when Mazari is in Australia, he again refers to the story again to emphasise his self-control and determination to fit in (187). In Afghanistan, however, with his life in danger, Mazari and his family see no choice but for him to flee. He explains their reasoning in paying a people smuggler to arrange his escape and his travel to Australia: ‘if the family tribe cannot survive, then by mercy of God, let one male member of that tribe find safety in the world, and let him rebuild everything from the start’ (221).

The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif is structured in alternating chapters, moving between Mazari’s life in Afghanistan and in Australia, where he is held in Woomera Detention Centre until he is granted a Temporary Protection Visa, followed by his attempts to establish a life in Australia as a rug mender. The narrative is remarkable for being one of the

⁵ Dale compiled his list of 50 Australians who matter, based on an assessment of the impact they have had on others lives, and an understanding that ‘the world would be a different place without them’. His list includes prominent business people, communicators, entertainers, scientists and ‘helpers’, with Rawi included in the latter category. Again, this supports my contention that refugee lives and narratives are not always consigned to the margins of the public sphere.

⁶ See ‘Afghanistan: The Human Rights of Minorities,’ pp 4-5 for an account of events of 1998. Amnesty International states that no journalists or independent monitors were allowed into the area, but that reports of deaths reached into the thousands.

few book-length autobiographical accounts, published thus far, of life inside Australia's detention centres.⁷ The book, in fact, opens with Mazari imprisoned in Woomera and singing a song in Dari to console him in his sorrow and loneliness. Guards hear his song and an interpreter asks him to sing it again. Mazari recounts:

[I]t strikes me that all the words I had employed in my long interview with the immigration officer and everything I have said to the officers and guards since, have not made a fraction of the impact on them as my song. For a few minutes, I was not merely one of hundreds of down-at-heel nuisances from some hellhole in Central Asia, but a man with something to offer, a song to sing and maybe a tale to tell that might be worth listening to; a tale that might even be true. (5).

Mazari's account of life in Woomera is signalled here as one that will provide insight into refugee and detainee lives in ways that interviews and statistics and reports cannot. In recounting the joy he felt at singing in Dari, he says, 'It is a pleasure to use my native tongue in this way, exploring the shadows of language. There is very little poetry to enjoy during a normal day in camp' (4). The implication is that the narrative to follow will be one marked by lyricism, an odd trait to associate with refugee testimony, and a pole apart from the testimony incarnate which Whitlock asserts produces a shattering sense of the limits of self and one's place to speak humanely. Like Riz Wakil, with whom this essay opened, Najaf Mazari offers a narrative characterised by reasonableness, one that draws on Afghan song and parable and traditional story, and one that draws its readers gently, personally, into the daily experiences of detention. Whereas contemporary media coverage emphasised the violence and degradation of detention, Mazari chooses to think of Woomera as a school in which one can learn what is expected of a good refugee: good manners, respecting queues, eating without complaint, not appearing pushy (68-71). Although in part this is intended ironically, Mazari is also narrating his own strategies for surviving detention. Progressing with relative ease from the intake camp to Main Camp, where he awaits the processing of his claim, Mazari entertains his readers with narratives of unrequited love amongst the detainees, tales not dissimilar in style to the traditional stories of his youth. Although Mazari hears of events in Sierra Camp, where reputedly the trouble-makers are held, and he witnesses violent protest, including an inmate's sewing together of his own lips, his commentary focuses predominantly on conciliation. *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* is, then, the story of a refugee learning to cope and adapt, with dissent playing little part in this narrative of a

⁷ Other accounts include the biographies *The Bitter Shore* (2008) and *Freeing Ali: The Human Face of the Pacific Solution* (2005), and *Moza's Story, an Ashmore Reef Account : Based on a True Story*, an assisted autobiographical narrative of 87 pages, with the narrator's identity protected by a pseudonym.

dislocated life. It is not surprising that the book ends with the trope of integration, as Mazari attends a ceremony at Malvern Town Hall in Melbourne where he receives his Australian citizenship. Again, reasonableness is underscored, with Mazari pointing out that to become Australian he was not asked to ‘tell the world that Australia is the best country on earth,’ or ‘to make myself ready to fight people in the streets with an automatic rifle,’ or ‘to say that I loved the Prime Minister. I was asked only to obey the laws of Australia, and I gladly agreed to that’ (252).

Unlike Mahboba Rawi, Najaf Mazari had no media profile prior to his narrative being published. After his release from Woomera, Mazari found work repairing Afghan rugs and eventually was able to open his own shop in Melbourne. Through his shop, his circle of Australian acquaintances grew, with a friend eventually introducing him to Iris Breuer and Cathi Lewis of Insight Publications who, ‘(a)fter many get-togethers over Afghani food and cardamom tea,’ commissioned author Robert Hillman to write Mazari’s story (255). Insight Publications is a Melbourne-based company producing educational texts and resources aimed mainly at the upper-secondary school level. They promote *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* as a non-fiction text ideal for years 9 to 12, and provide an accompanying study guide, also written by Hillman. Mazari and Hillman have appeared at book readings, a literacy conference, and writers’ festivals and their book has received positive reviews across a range of Australian media.⁸ I want to suggest, then, that, in spite of Mazari’s prior lack of media presence, book publication has resulted in some degree of mainstream attention, making his another case of a refugee narrative managing to achieve circulation and potentially impact upon public consciousness.⁹

An important qualification to the argument developed throughout this essay that refugee narratives have in some cases moved from the margins to the mainstream is the matter of mediation and discursive constraint. The narratives of disrupted lives discussed here have each entered the market through the efforts, or with the assistance of, interested others who mediate between narrating subjects and their readers. These writing partners do, indeed, as Whitlock asserts, ‘shepherd’ the narratives along mostly familiar paths to publication (57). Hillman’s involvement in the writing of *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* is particularly illustrative. Hillman is a distinguished autobiographer, with his 2005 memoir *The Boy in the Green Suit* winning the National Biography Award. He is also the author of non-fiction books

⁸ See, for example: Adams; Johnston; and On.

⁹ If I can be permitted an anecdote, returning to Australia recently from an overseas trip, I sat next to a woman from Melbourne who, when I enquired whether she’d read any refugee narratives, replied that she knew ‘the Afghan rugmaker’s book’ and spoke enthusiastically of visiting his shop to meet him.

for young readers. As well, by coincidence or not, he is the co-author of another autobiographical account of detention.¹⁰ *My Life as a Traitor* (2007), by Iranian-born and now Australian resident, Zarah Ghahramani and Hillman, is an account of Ghahramani's imprisonment in Tehran's Evin Prison. Like *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*, *My Life as a Traitor* is structured with dual time-frames, with alternating present-tense, past-tense chapters. Whereas Mazari's narrative moves between his experiences of detention and then settlement in Australia and the circumstances in Afghanistan that forced him to become an asylum seeker, Ghahramani's narrative shifts between her experiences of detention and torture in Iran and the circumstances of her life in Tehran that led to her arrest. The most glaring contrast between the two books is that *My Life as a Traitor* has no Australian content at all. The only indication of an Australian connection is a mention on the back cover that the co-author Robert Hillman 'befriended Zarah in Iran in 2003 and helped her escape to Australia, where she now has permanent residency.' Since its Australian publication, her book has been published in America and Europe and translated into at least four other languages, becoming one of the many texts of Iranian dissent circulating internationally. Mazari's book, on the other hand, with its account of life in Woomera and resettlement in Melbourne, is likely to remain limited to its Australian publication. The point I want to make with this comparison is the perhaps obvious one that the writing partner's contribution to the ultimate form of the narrative and its potential to enter particular markets is substantial. Whitlock, in this regard, is quite right, and an awareness of the circumstances of mediation should be integral to reading and reflecting upon refugee lives.¹¹

Whether the mediating process is considered constraining or facilitating depends upon one's focus, or one's critical perspective. Amongst the refugee narratives and testimony that interest Whitlock in *Soft Weapons*, mediation results in a type of quarantining, a locating of disruptive discourse at a safe distance from mainstream consumption. The book-length narratives surveyed here demonstrate that refugee narratives can negotiate their way into the public sphere. In doing so, however, dissent almost necessarily gives way to conciliation and integration as former refugee subjects attempt to realign their lives in terms that will provide the best outcomes for themselves and their families. This concern for outcomes extends as well to the narrators' communities of origin. *Mahboba's Promise*, in particular, devotes a

¹⁰ Hillman has written of his involvement with both Mazari and Ghahramani in an article appearing in the *Griffith Review* prior to the publication of these two books. He reveals details of his meeting with Ghahramani, but little of how he was approached to work with Mazari, and nothing of the writing process for either book.

¹¹ Circumstances of mediation are, of course, frequently underplayed in the publications. *Mahboba's Promise* is a case in point, with no information provided regarding the co-author, Vanessa Mican-Gramazio, except in the author's blurb which states that she has a Masters in Writing and has worked as a book editor for ten years.

substantial portion of its narrative to the performance of good works, as its narrator, after the death of her child and the break-up of her marriage, turns her life around by studying Islam and devoting herself to helping others (162-167). Both *Mahboba's Promise* and *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*, in their final pages, provide directions to associated websites where readers can learn more, and can volunteer or donate towards programs assisting communities in Afghanistan. The thought that a book published in Australia telling the story of a former refugee might generate sufficient interest to impact on disrupted lives half way around the world might seem far-fetched, but both Rawi and Mazari continue to be active in fund-raising and public awareness events and their books continue to circulate.¹² Whether refugee narratives have a wider effect on the public debate in Australia regarding refugees and detention is, of course, open to question, yet the fact that these stories are read in book groups, that their authors speak at writers' festivals, film openings and other public events is a substantial change in the writing and circulation of refugee life writing in Australia.

¹² As this article is submitted for publication, the Mazari website advertises its annual fundraiser for October 2010, with donations contributing to the purchase of ambulances in northern Afghanistan.

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