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Unravelling Woomera: lip sewing, morphology and dystopia

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Abstract

Presents a gendered interpretation of reports of protests in 2000-2002 among asylum seekers held at Australia’s recently closed Woomera Detention Centre, discussing instances of lip sewing that evoked strong reaction from the Australian Government, people and press. Suggests that an Irigarayan gendered reading of lip sewing assists in understanding these examples of self-harm, supplementing feminist readings of craft, and calling attention to local enactments of gender in both refugee studies and in organizational development and change.

Introduction

Recent increases in numbers of people seeking asylum and citizenship have resulted in attention to the legalities, moralities, effects and linguistics of refugee experiences. For example, Hardy and Phillips (1999, p. 7) drew attention to the importance of social context in constituting refugee subject positions, discussing tensions between concepts of human rights and sovereignty and also between paternalism and empowerment. They argued that ongoing negotiation among these positions is influenced by broader discourses on immigration, race, employment, patriotism and religion, examining cartoons as textual representations of the immigration discourse and its constitution of the Canadian Government, immigration system, public, and refugees.

Others have also drawn critical attention to definitions of the refugee (e.g. Bacon and Lynch, 2002/2003; Bibler Coutin, 1998; Malkki, 1995; Steinbock, 1998). In Australia, for example, distinctions have been made between the status of “illegal immigrants” and the more positive labelling of “asylum seekers” who seek refugee status (Stevens, 2002). However, and relevant to the subject of this special issue, there has been little attention to the place of gender in discussion of various refugee positions, although Lister (1997) has argued that, in general, the migrant remains an implicitly gendered subject who is assumed to be male (Castles and Miller, 1993; Mohanty, 1991, p. 22).

In order to redress this imbalance, we present the reporting of a series of protests among asylum seekers held at Australia’s recently closed Woomera Detention Centre and suggest that the gendering of refugees in press reports extends beyond essential male/female categorizations to gendered representations of the refugee body. We draw on the works of Luce Irigaray to inform the analysis of incidents of lip sewing at Woomera as extreme illustrations of extreme circumstances, arguing for greater attention to the gendered nature of refugee studies.

In doing so, we extend discussion of the role of trigger events in expediting transformational organizational change to a wider stage, for our thesis is that the incidents of lip sewing held sufficient symbolic power to polarize public opinion and facilitated the closure of Woomera. While triggers have previously been associated with personal, organizational and even
systemic change (e.g., Beddowes and Wille, 1990; Byeon, 1999; Dyck and Starke, 1999; Isabella, 1990, 1992; Leifer, 1989; Roger, 1995; Scott and Elton, 2002; Staudenmayer et al., 2002; Tichy and Ulrich, 1994), their symbolism has rarely been examined through the lense of gender (see Foreman, 2001; Gherardi, 1995; Martin, 1990; Ogbor, 2000).

We draw on poststructural feminism and the destabilization of gender categories (Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Harding, 1992; Riley, 1988) to show how the representation of asylum seekers as irresponsible and non-rational in the Australian popular press between 2000 and 2002 reproduced conservative and Australian values. This was achieved through the construction of asylum seeker identities that represented “the other”; as outsiders whose marginal presence reaffirmed that of the centre in terms of race, family values and, in particular, masculinity (Green et al., 2001, p. 192; Fraser and Nicholson, 1988; Mohanty, 1991). Following Acker (1992), our interest lies in how this particular order was created and our aim is to encourage critical reflection on its production and effects within a highly charged local context.

As Calás and Smircich (1999, p. 653) have argued, “[p]oststructuralist analyses demonstrate how signification occurs through a constant deferral of meaning from one linguistic symbol to another”, and we present ours in several steps. First, we give a contextual overview of Woomera. Then we discuss instances of lip sewing that evoked strong reactions from the Australian Government, people and press. We suggest that the special place of lips within Irigaray’s feminist morphology assists in understanding the extremity of these reactions, and conclude that an Irigarayan reading of lip sewing as gendered assists in analyzing this particular example of organizational change, in supplementing feminist readings of craft-based activism, and in the broader contesting of public-private domains.

**Overview of the Woomera detention centre, South Australia**

A rapid increase in unauthorized arrivals to Australia in the late 1990s led to the establishment of detention facilities in remote locations (Stevens, 2002, p. 889; see also Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2003). One of these was Woomera, which was located in northern South Australia (see Robinson, 2002). Enclosed by razor wire, Woomera was built to house 400, but nearly 1,500 asylum seekers were detained there by April 2000 (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2003). Woomera was labelled as Australia’s “most controversial detention centre” (Skelton, 2003) due to riots, escape attempts and incidents of detainee self-harm and abuse (Skelton, 2003; Stevens, 2002). There was much public demonstration at and press coverage of these events. Eventually, after resolution of visa requests, movement of detainees, and reduced new arrivals (Manne, 2002), Woomera was closed in April 2003 (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2003).

In early 2002, detainees at Woomera took part in a hunger strike that lasted over two weeks when the Australian government temporarily stopped processing claims for asylum by Afghans (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2003; Madigan et al., 2002; Parker, 2002; Skelton, 2003). It was reported that 189 people took part in the strike, of which 62 sewed their lips together (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002a). While this lip sewing was but one type of self-harm at Woomera (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2003; Manne, 2002), and while this incident was both preceded and followed by others (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002b; Di Girolamo, 2002; Lowth, 2000; Parker, 2002), we focus on it here as it was widely publicized in the popular press (Steketee, 2002; Hardy and
Phillips, 1999; Scott, 1990) and as it became a site for contestation that was symbolic of Woomera, of the detainee predicament as a whole and even, through cartoon representations, of Government silence and shame.

**Representations of lip sewing protests in the popular press**

One early representation of the lip sewers was that they were prepared to exploit their position of disadvantage. For example, it had been claimed that in 2002 asylum seekers had forcibly sewn their children’s lips together as a desperate attempt to gain publicity for their plight. While no evidence was found (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002a; Maiden, 2002; *Sun Herald, 2002*), the claim was important not only in regard to the current conditions but also as an intertextual reference back to earlier (and also unproven) claims that in October 2001, boat-ridden asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard in an effort to blackmail the Australian Navy into picking them up (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002a; Steketee, 2002; Yaxley, 2002). At the time, Prime Minister John Howard had been quoted as stating, “I can’t imagine how a genuine refugee would ever do that” (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002a). By implication, an asylum-seeker who sewed up the lips of a child was also unlikely to have “genuine” intent. Partly as a result, media attention became focused on the detainees at Woomera and, in particular, on their children (e.g. Macken, 2002; Manne, 2002).

Particular abhorrence to lip sewing in Australia was illustrated in reporting responses to a radio commercial that made light of the lip sewing. To the Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock, “[lip sewing is] a practice unknown in our culture...that offends the sensitivities of Australians”. To Mr Ruddock’s opponents, it is an obscenity that proves that detention camps are destroying people psychologically (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002c). With respect to the first of these views, lip sewing is presented as a non-rational activity undertaken by “others” capable of barbarous activities unknown (and unwelcome) in Australian civil/ized society. Asylum seekers have also been portrayed as childish and undeserving of public sympathy. For example, Bolt (2002) suggested that:

There are two explanations why most Australians still disagree with the commentators and activists who insist we give in to the **lip-sewing asylum seekers** of Woomera. The first, popular at fashionable dinner parties, is that the public is stupid, selfish, heartless, racist and scared of the other. The alternative, preferred by millions of parents who have raised toddlers to be civilised, is that we’ve learned that pandering to someone who is banging their head on a floor or holding their breath until they turn blue just reinforces bad behaviour (Bolt, 2002, p. 21, our emphasis).

Subsequent debate centered on whether or not lip sewing was culturally specific to those of Middle Eastern origin. In the context of the events following the terrorist attacks on the USA in September 2001, the potential association of this act with the Middle Eastern Muslim extremists was highly inflammatory and also unproven, representing a further attempt to demonize those seeking Australian asylum. Not only were asylum seekers presented as uncivilized, they were also possible terrorists who may cause substantial harm if released into the general community (*Sydney Morning Herald, 2002*) – or may, at the very least, encourage others to follow them to Australia (Steketee, 2002). Thus, while the asylum seekers’ voices literally could not be heard, their presence became a site for the location of otherness, of difference, and of the insecurity of their commentators.
In contrast, and in an effort to present just what the lip sewers suffered in order to make their silent statements, Williams (2002) described the act of lip sewing as horrifying. In addition, psychiatrists from Australia and overseas reported that lip sewing was not a cultural expression, and an American self-harm expert reported that there is “nothing particularly cultural about this behaviour. It simply reflects desperation” (Williams, 2002, p. 8; Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001).

In summary, incidents of lip sewing at Woomera have been used in various ways to signify lip sewers as social and political subjects either to be demonized or pitied, and whose experiences have been reported within the wider context of contemporary discourse on migration, population control, civil society and international affairs (Hardy and Phillips, 1999).

In the next section, we suggest that the extremity of the reactions to and reporting of lip sewing at Woomera may also be informed by recognition that lips are highly gendered sites for analysis, and that lip sewers are also gendered subjects. In particular, we suggest that the special place of lips within Irigaray’s feminist morphology assists in understanding the extremity of responses to these incidents of self-harm, and why the repeated occurrence of lip sewing at Woomera served to present that centre as an exemplar of a dystopia that was no longer tolerable.

**Irigaray’s feminist morphology**

As presented by Weedon (1997), poststructuralist theory places emphasis on the location of language within specific discourses that represent political interests and socially produce subjectivity and consciousness (Weedon, 1997, pp. 40, 179; see also Calás and Smircich, 1999). Within this, “psychoanalytic forms of poststructuralism look to a fixed psycho-sexual order” (Weedon, 1997, p. 22; see also Calás and Smircich, 1996). For example, in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (“TS”), Irigaray (1985) presents a sexuality that is informed by psychoanalysis but not defined within masculine parameters (Weedon, 1997, p. 61; see also Grosz, 1989, p. 105), arguing that women need to become speaking subjects in their own right, autonomously defined rather than “objects of exchange within a masculine sexual imaginary” (Whitford, 1999, p. 76).

For Irigaray, female pleasure or *jouissance*, later called “love of self on the side of the woman”, is the condition of challenging phallocratic indifference (Whitford, 1999, p. 76), and Irigaray adopts mimicry as her preferred device to “jam the theoretical machinery” of Freudian and post-Freudian analysis (Whitford, 1999, p. 126; see also Chanter, 1995, p. 241; Gatens, 1991, p. 116; Xu, 1995). Accordingly, Irigaray argues that female sexuality is autoerotic and plural and “is no longer constituted by a lack, as in Freud” (Weedon, 1997, p. 61). Instead, female libido is located in at least two sets of lips (one horizontal and one vertical) that touch each other all the time (Whitford, 1999). These are lips where no joining suture is possible and whose perpetual half-openness makes them “strangers to dichotomy”, offering a “threshold unto mucosity” that symbolizes potential for creation (Whitford, 1999, p. 175; emphasis in original; see also Grosz, 1989, pp. 105, 108, 115).

As an open container, Irigaray’s woman cannot be enclosed, mastered or appropriated (Whitford, 1999, p. 28), for something escapes or resists closure (p. 97) and residues “exceed patriarchal representations” (Grosz, 1989, p. 109). This symbolic resistance,
together with Irigaray's ambiguous writing style, serves to undermine “the dominance of the phallic, the well-formed, clarity, [and] singularity of meaning” (Gatens, 1991, p. 117). For example, Berg (1991, p. 56) has argued that Irigaray's “lips that speak to themselves” are carefully chosen for their textual and sexual ambiguity. As explained by Grosz (1989), the importance of the two lips stems from their morphology, a term that Irigaray uses to refer to “the social and psychical meaning of the body” — to ways in which the body and anatomy of each sex is lived by the subject and represented in culture. Accordingly, “If discourses and representations give the body its form and meaning, then feminist struggles must direct themselves to the representational or symbolic order which shapes women's bodies only in the (inverted) image of men's” (Grosz, 1989, pp. xix-xx; see also Gatens, 1991, p. 115). Irigaray's Utopic vision is for “the end of masculine truth” and for a new meeting of the sexes based on touch rather than on vision and the privileging of the visible over the invisible, and of male genitalia over female genitalia that cannot be seen (Brodribb, 1992, p. 108).

**Woomera as an Irigarayan dystopia**

Xu (1995) argues that any absurdity in Irigaray's lips speaking to themselves is similar to absurdity in the phallocentric tradition (see also Berg, 1991). As explained by Burrell (1992, p. 83), the term “phallogocentrism” is being used by Irigaray (1985) “to describe the very strong Western tradition which relegates the feminine to the position of matter, material or object against which the masculine defines itself”. For Xu (1995), Irigaray parodies phallogocentric discourse and fabricates essentialist truths in an act of playful repetition and disruption without simply making the lips “the new phallus” (see also Berg, 1991). Similarly, Whitford (1999, p. 97) argues that Irigaray's emphasis on lips should not be read as a “regressive retreat to the anatomical” but as a way to allow women to speak their sex and “to become speaking subjects in their own right” (Whitford, 1999, p. 76; see also Brodribb, 1992, p. 100; Chanter, 1995, pp. 3, 165-6). However, Irigaray's use of mimicry in her attention to lips has led to considerable controversy and debate over whether and to what extent she may be considered either a psychic or biological essentialist (Davidson and Smith, 1999; Xu, 1995).

Recognizing this debate, we suggest that the extremity of the reactions to, and reporting of, lip sewing at Woomera may have to do with lip sewing having gendered symbolism in addition to its literal protest as a means of resisting feeding during a hunger strike and its immediate signification as an indicator of the silence and silenced position of the asylum seekers in detention.

We argue this on four grounds. First, while there has been attention to the role of gender in various forms of protest in prison situations (e.g., Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001), we suggest that the asylum seekers' use of lip sewing as self-harm has been particularly powerful as it embodied the stifling of *jouissance*. Specifically, lip sewing is not only an act that draws attention to the silencing of voice but also does so through reducing the plurality of the half-open mouth to the (more masculine) singular. It displays the pain of a return to the phallocentrism of this singularity, and to its assimilative processes (Grosz, 1989; Whitford, 1999).

Second, we suggest that in lip sewing, the joining suture *is* possible and the visible threads serve to force the lips not only to be joined but also to remain joined. Rather than an ironic
tactile utopia, what was created at Woomera was a tactile dystopia that reconstructed feminine morphology. What lip sewing produced was, literally, a closed, single mouth – a grotesque masculinity in Irigarayan morphology – and one that was broadcast nightly on television screens around the world.

Third, whether the lip sewing was done to men or to women, it reinforced (even without intention) the invisibility of the refugees because of its association with the invisibility of female sexuality. That it was done mainly by men who came from strongly patriarchal cultures and that it was done in a detention context which, like that of a prison, may amplify masculinity (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001) may have, in turn, amplified its own power as an act of resistance and so we argue that both the extent of coverage of this act and the strength of reaction to it is not coincidental.

Fourth, whether or not lip sewing is of symbolic importance in Afghan or Iraqi cultures, it was certainly an important trigger in contemporary Australia. By sewing their lips, the asylum seekers triggered responses of fury, of sympathy, of dismissal and even of voyeurism more usually associated with women's protests in Western patriarchal society. Thus, even in terms of its effects, lip sewing was a gendered act that amplified the existing (and already strong) tensions around issues of immigration and identified the asylum seekers as gendered subjects. Its power as a signifier and even as an identifier (the "lip-sewing asylum seekers"), lies in its capacity to represent the intersection of competing discourses, including those around gender. In the end, the combination of tensions within and around the centre became so intolerable that the centre was closed.

In summary, the accounts of the lip sewing protests presented those protests as non-rational desperate pleas for voice and also as gendered acts that positioned the asylum seekers as vulnerable and inscribed them as “women-like” to readers and listeners (Calás and Smircich, 1992a, p. 226). As a result, and despite the fact that most of these protests were not actually carried out by women, they can be seen as symbolic performances of femininity (Acker, 1992; Green, et al., 2001) that served to reinforce both patriarchy and, ironically, the Australian public’s resistance to the asylum seekers’ position. The horror of these desperate acts of self-harm was not a horror that could be understood – only one that served to further the protesters’ position as “other”.

**Conclusion: lip sewing, craft and gender**

While this analysis may be seen as gender “over-sensitivity” (Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997), distasteful (Zalewski, 2000), and specific to these asylum seekers in this set of circumstances, we use it as an extreme illustration to call for greater attention to unravelling local enactments of gender in refugee studies (Lister, 1997) and also in traditional organizational development and change settings where analysis of trigger events, change agent roles, client-consultant dynamics and change intervention technologies may well be gendered even where they lack reference to essential notions of “women as women” (Spelman, 1988, p. 17; see also Calás and Smircich, 1992b, 1999; Ferguson, 1997; Zalewski, 2000).

Further, both the press accounts of lip sewing and the act itself are rich with symbolism as grotesque parody of the familiarity of domestic sewing, a craft activity usually associated with serenity and with domestic, private and therefore feminine domains (Burman, 1999).
Accordingly, we call for further extension of the theorizing of craft, for an Irigarayan reading of lip sewing as gendered assists in supplementing feminist readings of craft-based activism (see Wolfram Cox and Minahan, 2002) and in the broader contesting of public-private domains (Green et al., 2001).

Finally, while Irigaray's works have been somewhat neglected in organizational studies (exceptions include Burrell, 1992; Calás and Smircich, 1991, 1996), they may supplement existing metatheoretical discussions on the difficulty of standing above and/or outside existing analytical paradigms (see Grosz, 1989, p. 128). We find her parodies to be both amusing and inviting, particularly where they offer Utopic imaginings and potentials. However, in this paper we have, instead, presented a morphological dystopia in an effort to extend understanding of a shameful period in Australian immigration history. In so doing, we suggest that Irigaray also offers new ways of engaging with material arenas that are distasteful and disquietening. Seeing lip sewing as craft offers one such disruptive possibility—gendered, embodied, subversive craft.

References


