ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 47 No. 1–2 Pages 337–357

Comics Online: Detention and White Space in "A Guard's Story"

Golnar Nabizadeh

Abstract: This paper explores the intersections between online comics, biopolitics, and the experimental form in "At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard's Story," published by *The Global Mail*. It begins by noting the domestic Australian context in which the comic is published and the risks taken by the anonymous narrator in sharing the experience with the story's creators. The analysis argues that the narrative intervenes in public debate by bringing to light encounters between guards and detainees who are mostly excluded from recognition in the broader mediascape. The essay suggests that in this way, the narrative draws attention to "states of exception" that repress knowledge about the plight and rights of refugees and asylum seekers by depicting some of the traumas experienced by detainees and their guards. By undertaking a detailed examination of the mechanics of "A Guard's Story," including the use of white space and scrolling, the essay demonstrates the productive capacity of comics to explore and provoke questions about aesthetics and the representation of biopolitics and human rights, particularly in the digital domain. Specifically, I argue that the complex use of white space instantiates a multidirectional relationship between the reader and the characters of the text and that the reader must actively interpret the use of space as it evokes multiple physical and psychic spaces that disrupt a simple reading of the work.

Keywords: comics, digital, asylum seekers, refugees, "A Guard's Story," Australia

> Comics are . . . like sheet music, they allow you to turn space into time.
>
> Art Spiegelman, "What the %$#! Happened to Comics?"

I. Introduction

As Hillary Chute suggests, "in the historically relative sense of the term, the medium of comics has always been experimental" (407). Experimental writing, with its self-conscious investment in exploratory forms of representation, plays a critical role in creating new forms of testimony, an important feature of the emergence of comics as a medium of social critique.[1] "At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard's Story" was published online in February 2014 by the non-profit (and now defunct) news site *The Global Mail*. The story depicts an anonymous narrator's experience working as a guard inside one of Australia's detention centres. Motivated by a desire to see what life was like "on the inside," the narrator decided to work as a "client support worker"—a guard—for Serco, a multinational company that operates detention centres on the Australian mainland. The story follows a training schedule before focusing on several episodes that punctuate the narrator's employment. Over time, the brutalizing treatment of the detainees has a dramatic impact on his or her well-being and the story ends with the narrator's resignation. By sharing this experience, the narrator presumably breached a confidentiality agreement with Serco to keep details about his or her employment private, and the secrecy surrounding the act of narration is therefore a critical aspect of the comic's production.

The creation of the comic comes at a time when Australia has largely abrogated its humanitarian responsibilities under international law and particularly the *1951 Refugee Convention*. In May 2013, the Australian Federal Government passed amendments under the Commonwealth *Migration Act 1958* (Migration Act) that excised mainland Australia from the "migration zone." Previously, asylum seekers who reached the Australian mainland could not be sent offshore for processing. Now, asylum seekers to Australia are transferred to the tiny Pacific nation of Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea where they are held in mandatory detention. The detrimental impact of detention was ex-

pressed most clearly by Gillian Triggs, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), who stated that "34 per cent of children detained in Australia and Christmas Island have a mental health disorder of such severity that they require psychiatric support" ("'Locking up Children Taints Us All'"). This followed the release of the AHRC report, *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014*, which recommended the release of all children in detention and the amendment of the Migration Act to limit the length of time children and parents can be detained. The report was received with hostility by the Australian Federal Government, which sought Triggs' resignation and alleged that the "Forgotten Children" report was tainted by bias.[2] In 2016, Triggs is still President of the AHRC, but tension around the treatment of asylum seekers remains high.

Against this political landscape, the "comics journalism" of "A Guard's Story" offers a striking depiction of the plight of individuals in detention centres. "Comics journalism" is a term most frequently associated with the work of Joe Sacco, perhaps best known for *Palestine* (1996), in which he uses the comics format to present his ventures in Palestinian refugee camps and offers a visual iteration of the plight of the Palestinian people. As Sacco writes, "[t]here will always exist, when presenting journalism in the comics form, a tension between those things that can be verified, like a quote caught on tape, and those things that defy verification, such as a drawing purporting to represent a specific episode" ("Preface" xi). He notes that "there is nothing *literal* about a drawing" and that cartoonists arrange the elements of a story "deliberately" and "with intent" ("Preface" xi-xii; emphasis in original). This is what I call the "opaque legibility" of comics—their words and images are highly mediated, and self-consciously so. This is not to suggest that drawings, or words, cannot or should not be accurate, but that the comics form supports creative inquiry because its represents (rather than seeks to replicate) reality. In other words, the organisation of the panels and their contents offer windows into the worlds they represent, and each element is represented in a manner unique to an artist's hand. While maintaining a strong affinity to the notion of "comics journalism," "A Guard's Story" was created through a collaborative effort between journalists, artists,

and the anonymous narrator. The collaborative writing and drawing of the text sets it apart from sole-authored and now canonical comics such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The collaborator-authors of "A Guard's Story"—Sam Wallman, Nick Olle, and Pat Grant—explain that they maintained close communication with the narrator to ensure that his or her experiences were recorded accurately. Indeed, Wallman has explained that, excluding a brief statement about Serco, the narrative captures the narrator's own words exactly.

"A Guard's Story," however, is not the first exposé on dysfunction within Australian detention centres. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Four Corners* program produced a report entitled "The Guard's Story," which traced the experiences of several guards working inside one of Australia's most notorious detention centres at Woomera before it was eventually closed in 2002 (McDermott). Much like the narrator's experiences in "A Guard's Story," the guards interviewed on *Four Corners* spoke of the poor training offered to new guards, the prevalence of self-harm, and the deterioration of mental health among detainees and guards alike, including the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder in both groups. The program also revealed footage of episodic violence within Woomera as recorded by several guards working there. "A Guard's Story," then, might be regarded as a new entry in public debates about life inside Australian detention centres.

As Wallman, the illustrator, explains, the piece offers a useful "entry point" into discussions about the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia (qtd. in Fisher). The production of the narrative created a substantial comment in an already uneasy political landscape on the place and plight of asylum seekers to Australia. "A Guard's Story" has garnered 64,000 "likes" on Facebook, almost four thousand "tweets" on Twitter, and was shared more than fifty thousand times within a fortnight of its publication (Fisher). Indeed, the text's mobility is critical to the transmission of its testimony as media bans on detention centres have meant that the detainees drawn by Wallman are rarely heard or seen in mainstream Australian media. In contrast, their images are most commonly found in brief clips on news media—frequently depicted

behind fences or in transit, as though that is their ontological status *ab initio*. As a contrapuntal cultural narrative, "A Guard's Story" complicates the dominant perspective on the (non-)place of asylum seekers in Australia by depicting individual stories—about asylum seekers as well as guards—that are bound together more intimately than might otherwise be imagined.

Ironically, in the same month that "A Guard's Story" was published, the Australian Department of Customs and Border Control also released a comic, "Afghanistan Storyboard," aimed at deterring would-be asylum seekers to Australia. The storyboard, intended for an Afghan audience, depicts a young Afghan man tearfully leaving his family in war-torn Afghanistan. After a treacherous journey to Australia by boat, the man is shown lamenting his conditions in a sterile detention centre cell, now seemingly regretful about leaving his homeland as he misses his family back home. This message is supported by the rich colours in which Afghanistan is depicted in the man's memory, compared to the dull monochrome of the detention centre. The work, a part of the government's "No Way" campaign—meaning "there's 'no way' you'll stay in Australia if you arrive without a visa"—was criticised by human rights groups such as Amnesty International for its underlying message, which perversely appeared to suggest that detention in Australia was worse than the conditions in a war-torn homeland. At this time the comic has been removed from the government website, but its production is significant because it signals the complex participation of graphic narratives in global mediascapes.

II. Changing the Frame

Johanna Drucker suggests that "graphic novels are uniquely contemporary phenomena for reasons that combine technological opportunity and cultural disposition" (39). In the case of "A Guard's Story," this technological vector is highlighted by the story's publication on an online platform. The radical mobility of online material helped make the story a global phenomenon: for example, a blog titled "World Comics Finland" actively promoted the story alongside a frenzied discussion of how to share the story on Reddit's Australian platform. In an online context,

the graphic narrative form readily incorporates the digital dimension into its system of signification precisely because it already operates at the nexus between visual and verbal forms of communication—a feature that characterizes most online materials. Online comics range from simple drawings to strips that incorporate gif animations in novel and delightful ways. One of the most remarkable is Luke Pearson's ongoing strip, "Some People," which uses loops in its narratives to create stories that are at once rhizomatic yet simple to navigate. Like many comics, Pearson's strip invites the audience to slow down by utilising loops in the narrative that first confuse and then reward patient reading.

In an era of impulse-driven consumption, comics usefully intervene in everyday reading practices because they encourage readers to take time to create meaning, thereby stimulating the kind of counter-cultural thinking associated with experimental or exploratory literature. In contrast to the sound bites and visual "flashes" that constitute much of our engagement with news and online media, many digital graphic narratives exploit the online format to subvert, rather than support, common reading practices. Much like their paper counterparts, online comics frequently require readers to lengthen their reading time and concentration to comprehend the biocular messages before them. Typically, the use of panels helps shape the process of meaning-making as the iconographic value of both words and images combine to create meaning. For example, an elongated panel can function in a similar way to an establishing shot in a film by inviting the reader to absorb the setting and details of a scene, whereas a narrow panel might provide a brief incision of information, perhaps conveying shock, excitement, or any number of experiences we might associate with rapidity.

Across this exploratory spectrum, the biocularity of visual-verbal texts allows artists to complicate the representation of time and space across the surface of the page, utilising rhythm, balance, and shifts in perspective to add to the visual impact of the story. Even when the panels are presented in a traditional comic strip format, the sequential nature of the narrative encourages readers to move back and forth between frames to confirm, query, or unsettle their interpretation of the text. This embodied oscillation mimics the way we learn to interpret the world by

testing established forms of knowledge. Reading in this way is particularly useful for understanding a new or unfamiliar perspective because it asks the reader to engage with a defamiliarized view of the world. These exploratory techniques are all evident in "A Guard's Story."

III. "A Guard's Story"

The opening sentence of "A Guard's Story" reads: "I always understood that indefinite detention did terrible things to people." This statement is accompanied by a hand-drawn image of a man's face behind bars (see fig. 1).

The bars are striking for the way they are formed from negative space—that is, the white space that dominates the story. The image is also notable because it lacks a conventional frame. Staring out blankly, the man's face is trapped by bars that emerge and are swallowed by the screen. As the reader scrolls down through the story, the next image depicts the man's head, now carved open along the lines where the bars were initially placed. Unaccompanied by words, the image portrays the violence of his presumed indefinite detention through the physical deformation of his head (see fig. 2).

Fig. 1. White bars, "A Guard's Story."

Fig. 2. Wounded head, "A Guard's Story."

Read sequentially, the opening images of "A Guard's Story" are important because the shift in perspective—and adjustment in the use of white space—reveals vastly different messages. The first image is presented to the reader *en face*; the man's face is interrupted by the bars. Much like the visual perspective, the message seems fairly straightforward: it presents an image with which readers would be familiar. The second image, however, presents something new and asks the viewer to discern a deeper dimension to the initial image. It seems that "indefinite detention" has taken its toll on the subject for reasons that as yet remain unknown. The statement "I always understood that indefinite detention did terrible things to people" also confirms that this is a story told in retrospect and that the images are informed by hindsight.

Indefinite detention has received sustained attention in contemporary scholarship. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler defines "indefinite detention" as an "illegitimate exercise of power" that is "part of a broader tactic to neutralize the rule of law in the name of security" (67). She argues that "'[i]ndefinite detention' does not signify an exceptional circumstance, but, rather, the means by which the exceptional becomes established as a naturalized norm" (67). Butler provides her definition of the term in her analysis of the indeterminate status of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, which in turn informs her broader discussion about whose lives are "grievable" (38). Although "A Guard's Story" arises in response to the treatment of asylum seekers rather than political prisoners, "detainees" in Guantanamo and Australia are both subject to what might be described as extra-judicial laws, designed to keep these groups beyond the reach of the rule of law.[3] "A Guard's Story" speaks out against the horror of this occlusion—what Giorgio Agamben terms the "state of exception." Like Butler, Agamben isolates a humanitarian reduction at work in states of exception in which the subject of the exception is reduced to "bare life" and occupies "a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast" (*Homo Sacer* 109). This zone of indistinction is instantiated through the state of exception—an inherent feature of the law that permits the law, or laws, to be set aside as required but usually only in circumstances of "emergency," in which either the state or some essential element of it are gravely imperiled.

In an Australian context, the operation of this maneuver is clear in the amendments to the Migration Act. Without the sovereign operation of the statute in the first instance, it would not be possible to amend the law so as to exclude its operation under the amended Migration Act. "A Guard's Story" mimics a visual "zone of indistinction" as its contents are framed only by the computer screen. The story's contents are not tethered to a clearly discernable framework but float between different orders of referentiality. The use of white space asks the reader to create meaning as the narrative moves between recollected and imagined spaces. In this way, the white space acquires multiple, shifting meanings.

By adopting a simple schematic comparison, "A Guard's Story" draws attention to the negative materialities of a biopolitical order and how the "state of exception" operates as the "preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and at the same time, abandons the living being to the law" (Agamben, *State* 1). In this way, the story extends the connectedness between graphic narratives and the haptic representation of bodies—found in print narratives such as *Persepolis*, *Fun Home*, and *Maus*, among others—into a digital context. The examples below demonstrate how indefinite detention conscripts the bodies it circumnavigates to a zone of indistinction (see figs. 3 and 4).

The boundaries in the first scene acquire the force of material reality against the individuals whose bodies they bisect; they are depicted as solid black lines that cross and contain those bodies (see fig. 3). The detainees are depicted in painfully contorted positions, vulnerable to the outsized graphic boundaries that cleave them. By way of contrast, the second scene depicts the ease with which other individuals—those outside the "state of exception"—can circulate within and traverse lines of exclusion (see fig. 4). Accordingly, those boundaries acquire smaller proportions, ready to be stepped or flown over and mostly disregarded. The indeterminate status of asylum seekers can lead to a condition of "derealization," according to Butler. This is a condition in which a person is "neither alive nor dead but interminably spectral" (33–34) and is particularly common among racial and cultural Others.

The spectrality of which Butler speaks echoes Agamben's work on bare life in *Homo Sacer*, and the biopolitical contours of detention are

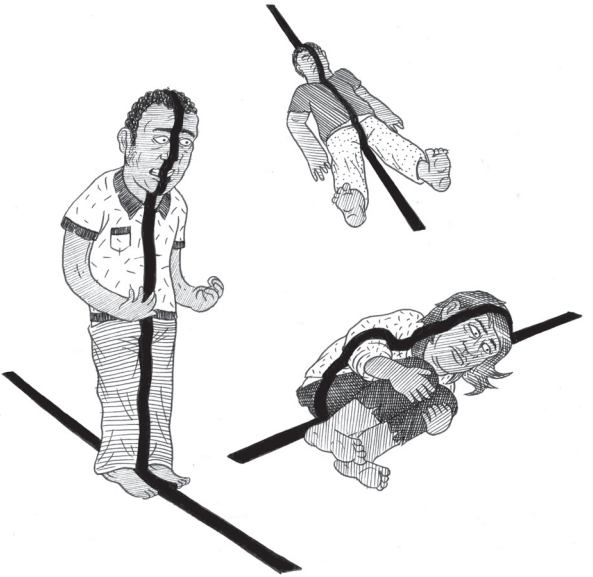

Fig. 3. Marking boundaries, "A Guard's Story."

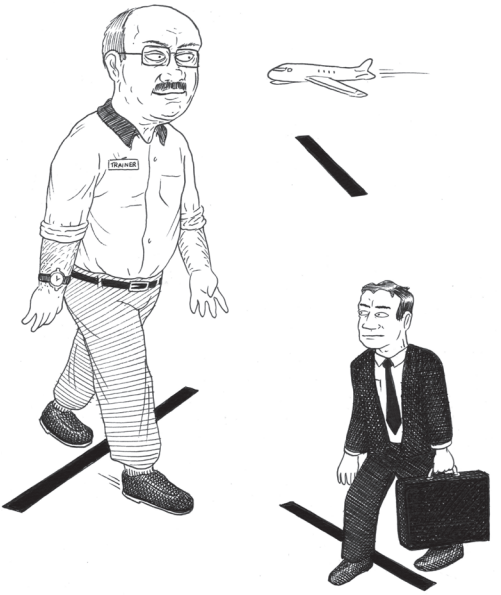

Fig. 4. Boundary privileges, "A Guard's Story."

realised through the use of white space, such as the way it carves out prison bars in the example above. Perhaps more accurately, the inmates' bodies are recognisably material when they are tattooed by the boundaries around them. These bodies are restricted not only by how they may travel but how they are apprehended. In this instance, the bodies of the detainees are at least partially defined by the boundaries that mark their confinement.

IV. White Space and Reading Online

In contrast to the boundaries that mark the bodies of the asylum seekers, the narrative structure of "A Guard's Story" is devoid of frames or panels altogether. Informally, the screen acts as an extra-diegetic panel that frames some of the segments; however, the preponderance of white space is one of the most notable aspects of the piece. As Tony Hughes-d'Aeth suggests, the impact of a field without borders is that it "implicates the seer into the world of the seen" (213). His comment is relevant to "A Guard's Story," in which not-seeing, represented by the white field of the interface, is transformed into a negative space that shapes and holds its narrative contents. The use of white space to de-frame the story instead of panels to maintain a comfortable distance between the narrative and the reader is significant because it dispenses with conventional panel outlines.

Rebecca Scherr makes the same point in her analysis of Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*: "We are addressed not as passive viewers, but as active participants in the gathering and hearing of testimony; our engagement with the material is corporeal, physical, intimate" (5). Similarly, the absence of formal frames in "A Guard's Story" enhances the dispossession of its subjects by mimicking the precarious and uncertain status of the detainees—as psychic, embodied, and legal subjects—over substantial, if not indefinite, periods of time. The dominance of white space seems thick with unresolved meaning as it surrounds the people and objects within it, if not threatening to engulf them altogether.

If the white space threatens to overwhelm the detainees, it also presents a threat to the legitimacy of the guards, particularly through its disruptive representation of their training and ordinance. The unframed

space functions as a fantastical space because the absence of frames means that the narrative moves seamlessly within and without the space of imprisonment. This fluidity supports the text's exploratory nature as it brings together diverse settings, people, and ideas within the narrative to create liberated space that is not restricted by divisions between the various settings. This lack replicates the space of indefinite detention, simultaneously referring to the refugees' ability to move freely within the detention camp as well as a kind of interminable imprisonment with no clear temporal boundaries. In this context, the white space holds ambiguous, multivalent meanings as the reader must engage with it as a critical and metaphorically emancipatory space. Contrary to the physical and psychological borders that lock away the detainees, in "A Guard's Story," the detainees occupy the same humanized space as the readers, who presumably enjoy "mainstream" legal and social rights.

The story commences with the narrator's employment with Serco. The reader is granted a rare glimpse into the training of would-be guards as the narrative moves between training scenes and the narrator's thoughts. One activity involves a "restraint" exercise for which the narrator acts as the detainee and object of restraint. The potential impact of detention on detainees' bodies is depicted in an episode in which the narrator participates in a training exercise designed to immobilise asylum seekers. As the narrator undertakes training, he contemplates that "[a]ll [he] could think was that this was happening to a refugee inside the centre or a Tamil guy who had lived through a war and was fleeing torture." The picture accompanying this statement depicts the narrator lying underneath two co-workers, who look at each other as they happily reflect on their success in executing the exercise. In contrast, the narrator looks out toward the reader, his face lying behind a row of three masks. These veneers depict the narrator's thoughts of the refugees as they are pacified—their physical restraint perhaps reinvoking the traumas they have previously withstood. The sequential placement of the masks also indicates the empathic relation between the narrator and the refugees he encounters. Unsurprisingly, the narrator's internal response to the training exercise is "I couldn't handle it." Over time, the strain of working as a guard becomes overwhelming, and the narrator decides to resign

after suffering from deteriorations in his or her relationships and mental health. The narrator concludes that "[n]obody on the outside believed how bad it was in there," and this brings the main action to a close. In this way, the narrative conveys the physical and affective impacts of detention on both guards and detainees and disrupts the binary of emancipation and confinement while acknowledging the material contours of these conditions.

Another distinctive feature of the text is that the reader must scroll vertically to navigate the text. The physical act of scrolling can be regarded as the digital counterpart to turning the page in a print novel, and scrolling up or down resembles flipping back and forth between the pages of a book. Here scrolling takes on both material and digital dimensions: by navigating the text the reader also unfurls the digital scroll of the text. The intimate relationship between the two meanings of "scroll" draws attention to how textual meaning is shaped not only through the text's content but also its form in space and time—here in an online context. Scrolling down also seems apt for the way that asylum seekers are moved away from and increasingly off Australian shores. As the editors of the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* claim, by "unrepressing" questions about what literature is—its limits and possibilities—"[e]xperimentation makes alternatives visible and conceivable" (Bray, Gibbons, and McHale 1). In the case of "A Guard's Story," the reading process illuminates repressed elements about the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia. The reader can use the mouse to pause at or skim over different parts of the text or reencounter them by scrolling up. In this way, the narrative takes full advantage of the online graphic narrative form to map its representation of traumatized subjects through the structure of the story. This is, I suggest, also connected to the predominance of white space in the text, as scenes partially emerge from its opacity. Through the illustrations and the narrator's text the reader bears witness on scenes that, it seems, would otherwise remain submerged.

The hand-drawn aspect of comics is important, particularly in depicting images where other forms of visual record (such as photography or film) might be prohibited. Further, the indexical mark of the art-

ist's hand offers a point of connection between the reader and the text beyond the transmission of the content itself. In this respect, I agree with Drucker's suggestion that the "energy" of drawings by hand imparts a "lively immediacy, vigor, and an urgency to communicate that becomes part of the urgency of the story" (44). This kind of communication gains traction when considered in relation to Scherr's discussion of "haptic visuality." Scherr posits that haptic visuality can be understood as "a connective readerly address incorporating sensation and emotion in its communicative reach" ("Shaking Hands" 21). As Scherr suggests, the "tactile" quality of the line drawing "continually communicates the subjective and affective dimensions of the content presented" (24). The impact of the story is also apparent in Wallman's comments about the difficult process involved in its production:

> It was emotional to make. I have some friends who have recently got out of detention and are waiting for their visa applications to be processed, and one of them has been denied already. They're having a really hard time and I was thinking of them a lot while I was drawing. It was pretty sad to spend 100 hours sitting on my own, thinking about how brutal things are. (qtd. in Fisher)

The brutality of which Wallman speaks finds its way into the text, both in its content and form. In a digital context, the physical connectedness between reader and text is enhanced by the scrolling inherent to the interface. As one scrolls downward, people and objects appear to float onscreen in a spatial and temporal vacuum. In Butler's words, what the reader encounters is something that "exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things" (*Frames of War* 9). We see this in practice in "A Guard's Story," where the untethered contents of the narrative float onscreen and the entire work is characterized by a limbo that surrounds the status of the detainees, represented visually not only through the use of white space but also signified through the uprooted buildings that punctuate the story and act as markers of transitions in the narrative's arcs (see fig. 5).

Dislodged from any recognizable setting, the floating structure suggests a state of transition along with uncertainty about its significance—reminiscent of the farmhouse in which Dorothy travels from Kansas to Oz. It also offers a visual approximation of the "zone of indistinction" of which Agamben speaks. In "A Guard's Story," however, not only the buildings are displaced. In one sequence, the narrator recalls hearing about a child refugee who "cut his head open on the way home from school." This incident is illustrated from the interior perspective of the bus, with little to orient the scene. The reader sees a bus seat bearing the child with the deep angle of the seat lying perpendicular to the adjacent windows. The mismatched angles immediately indicate the traumatic trajectory of the child's journey. The view through the bus windows mimics the structure of the story as a whole, and the downward tilt of the windows reveals a gradual descent from the view of skyscrapers, through the Earth's crust to what looks like an exploding magma core. This micro-sequence powerfully supports the devastation of the main action. The subsequent panel depicts the bus in quarter-profile, with a stylised stream of blood gushing forth from the open door of the bus.

Recalling the frequency of self-harm inflicted by the detainees, the narrator tells of another incident in which a man placed broken glass in his mouth and threatened to swallow the shards if he was not permitted to meet with his case worker. The image of a man whose desperate eyes

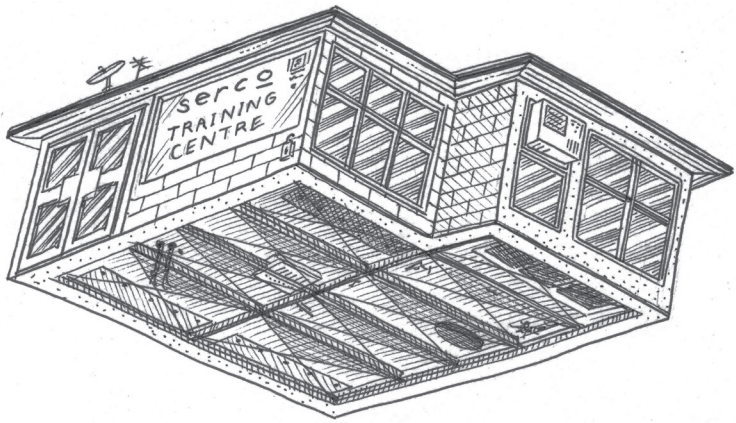

Fig. 5. Serco Training Centre, "A Guard's Story."

look out to the reader while his mouth is bloodied and covered by slivers of glass captures the horrific contrast between the desperation of his act and the relative simplicity of his demand. His careworn face and electrified hair contribute to the impact of this recollection.

At times only parts of an image are exposed or remembered. For example, in the following panel, the violence of detention is writ explicitly on the body, as the narrator explains that "self-harm was really common in the detention centres . . . everywhere you looked there were people with fresh cuts and scars up their arms." These statements bookend the drawing of an arm, with a Victorian state border tattooing the upper arm, before morphing into the form of scars and fresh cuts towards the wrist (see fig. 6).[4]

The social and intimate impact of detention is represented in this image, where the body becomes the material site over and through which boundaries are contested and shaped. The policing of bodies that the guards undertake is a material process in its own right, as well as a metaphor for the federally mandated policing of the Australian mainland and its territories. The story presents detention as a liminal space that is at once part of but also separate from the nation through the exposure of its subjects to extra-judicial "laws." In this space, the body as a biopolitical site is brought into sharp relief, evident in the actions of the asylum seekers such as inflicting self-harm. Wallman's drawings are somewhat similar to Sacco's searing images, where human appendages

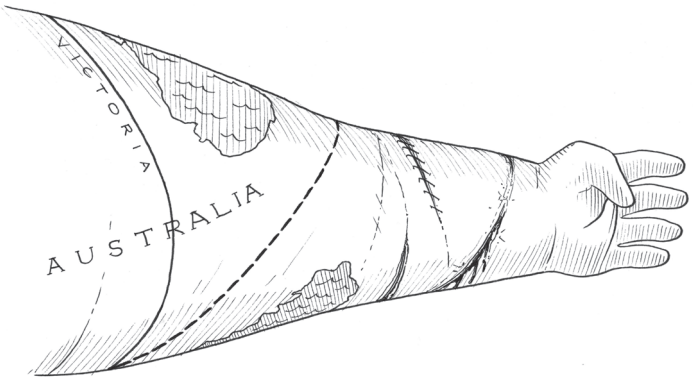

Fig. 6. Marking boundaries, "A Guard's Story."

and limbs are drawn in a non-realistic, fluid style. The representation of suppleness in the subjects' bodies reminds the viewer of the vulnerability of the body as well as its ability to bear—up to a point—inhumane conditions. The bodies' elasticity also, I suggest, bears the mark of their trauma. They are elastic because they have had to contend with suffering and deprivation, and their figuration speaks of these conditions.

V. Conclusion

In the brief coda, the narrator encounters two Rohingya asylum seekers from the detention centre in a suburban shopping centre. In detention, the two men had staged a protest by standing on the roof of the centre, and the narrator notes, "I don't know how long they were there for." The narrator explains that "we [the guards] were told not to look at them or speak to them . . . to pretend they weren't there." Acting against this injunction, however, the narrator says, "I used to look up and wave at them when no-one was looking." Responding to the narrator's recognition of their presence, the men "waved back but they never smiled," and this simple yet powerful exchange impresses itself upon the narrator's mind (see fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Recognition, "A Guard's Story."

The end of the narrative repeats this image and the narrator's wave back to the Rohingya men offers something of a reprieve—a literal and metaphorical afterlife—to the deprivation of recognition within the detention centre. Perhaps more than any other sequence in the story, the episode conveys how sight—as a non-verbal form of communication—can acknowledge what would otherwise be denied. In the case of the Rohingya men, their presence is disavowed within the detention centre; the employees are instructed not to look at them as a way of ignoring their protest. The men look back at the guard, and it is their gaze that is represented in the story; their faces and hands are brought out of the white space that otherwise consumes their bodies. Like their faces, their open, outward-facing palms denote the communication that is taking place.[5] Yet their downcast gaze resists the reader's acknowledgement and produces an effect similar to the disavowal to which they have been subject.

Butler suggests that "[t]o learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter" (*Frames of War* 100). In "A Guard's Story," readers are presented with a new perspective on the space of the camp as a biopolitical site in an Australian context. Remarkably, the narrative offers this insight through the eyes of a guard, a usually maligned figure within discussions of biopolitics. In this context, the devastating impact of detention is represented not only in relation to the detainees but also on the subjects that would police them, and this augments the scope of debate on the impacts of detention on its inhabitants. The narrative draws attention to the physical connectedness of the detainees in the ways they support each other, and the privileged position of the guard encourages comparisons between life inside and outside the space of the camp. Through the haptic visuality of the text, and the use of scrolling, the narrative offers an important extension of the biopolitical impulse of comics into the digital realm. As an experimental work, "A Guard's Story" continues the exploratory agenda of graphic narratives through its formal innovations. Discarding the use of traditional panels interrupts normalized reading, at least in the context of reading Western graphic narratives, and the work thus self-reflexively considers how perspectives are formed, discarded, and reshaped. As with other

graphic narratives, the hand-drawn images are intimate and indexical marks of the artist as he rendered the narrator's story into a visible and recognizable form. The characters in the story—guard and detainees alike—occupy multiple spaces within and outside of detention, which denies the reader the ability to associate asylum seekers solely with detention. Instead, the reader must actively interpret the spaces of the text as they evoke physical and psychic spaces and contemplate the use of white space and the relationship that it bears to the story and its characters. By liberating the characters from their normative associations, "A Guard's Story" asks readers to consider the narrative complexities of life within detention centres and in the broader community as it carves new spaces of visibility. The narrative illuminates liveliness in the unlikely space of detention and challenges the space of detention as a "zone of indistinction" by drawing attention to the specificities that constellate the lived experiences of those "in detention." In so doing, the story begins to "unrepress" the narratives of those who inhabit Australian detention centres by inviting readers to witness its difficult contours.

Notes

1 One can see early examples of comics that playfully disrupt their own textual ontologies. For example, in Winsor McCay's serialised strip, *Little Sammy Sneeze* (1904–06), the eponymous character shatters the frame around him because of a powerful sneeze, a pattern that is repeated in other episodes. McCay continued his experimentation in comics in later works such as *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904–25), and, most famously, in *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–26). One of the most remarkable aspects of McCay's work is the way that the panels form part of the narrative vocabulary of the work. As "windows" into the world of the text, the frames bend, shrink, and grow as required. In this way, they actively draw attention to their contingent rather than fixed status as creative texts.

2 See Gordon.

3 Indeed, an article run by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 August 2014 draws a closer connection between the two loci in its title, "Refugees' Mental Anguish in Australia's 'Guantanamo.'" The article claims that "Australia's policy of indefinite detention of the refugees with adverse security findings was found by the United Nations last August to be in breach of more than 140 international laws and conventions, but a year later the government is yet to respond to the ruling" (Flitton and Moncrief).

4 The image of the tattooed arm calls to mind Agamben's concerns in "No to Bio-Political Tattooing," in which he discusses his refusal to be subject to fingerprinting upon arrival to the United States as a practice of control that "had always been properly considered inhumane and exceptional."
5 For a detailed consideration of the link between hands, connectedness, and haptic visuality, see Scherr's "Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*."

Works Cited

"Afghanistan Storyboard." Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.

——. "No to Bio-Political Tattooing." *Le Monde*. Le Monde, 10 Jan. 2004. Web. *radical.org*. 18 June 2015.

——. *State of Exception*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005. Print.

"At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard's Story." *Reddit.com*. Reddit Australia, 7 Feb. 2014. Web. 22 Feb. 2016.

Bechdel, Alison. Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Bray, Joe, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale, eds. *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. Print.

——. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.

Chute, Hillary. "Graphic Narrative." *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*. Ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale. New York: Routledge, 2012. 407–19. Print.

Drucker, Johanna. "What is Graphic About Graphic Novels?" *English Language Notes* 46.2 (2008): 39–55. Print.

Fisher, Tim. "Telling a Guard's Story." *Broadsheet*. 20 Feb. 2014. Web. 28 Sept. 2014.

Flitton, Daniel, and Marc Moncrief. "Refugees' Mental Anguish in Australia's 'Guantanamo.'" *Sydney Morning Herald*. 25 Aug. 2014. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.

The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014. *Australian Human Rights Commission.* Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

Gordon, Michael. "Revealed: Abbott Government Tried to Remove Gillian Triggs as Head of the Australian Human Rights Commission." *Sydney Morning Herald*. 14 Feb. 2015. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

Hughes-d'Aeth, Tony. *Paper Nation: The Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australia*. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2001. Print.

"'Locking up Children Taints Us All', says Commission President." *Australian Human Rights Commission*. Australian Human Rights Commission, 12 Feb. 2015. Web. 20 June 2015.

McCay, Winsor. *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. 1904–25. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1973. Print.

——. *Little Nemo in Slumberland.* 1905–26. Palo Alto: Sunday Press, 2005. Print.

——. *Little Sammy Sneeze*. 1904–06. Palo Alto: Sunday Press, 2007. Print.

McDermott, Quentin. "The Guard's Story." *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*. 15 Sep. 2008. Television.

Migration Act 1958. Federal Register of Legislation. Australian Government, 2016. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

"The 1951 Refugee Convention." *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

Pearson, Luke. "Some People." *lukepearson.com*. n.p., 2009. Web. 22 Feb. 2016.

Sacco, Joe. Footnotes in Gaza. London: Jonathan Cape, 2009. Print.

——. *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001. Print.

——. "Preface: A Manifesto, Anyone?" *Journalism*. New York: Metropolitan, 2012. xi-xiv. Print.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon, 2004. Print.

Scherr, Rebecca. "Framing Human Rights: Comics Form and the Politics of Recognition in Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*." *Textual Practice* (2013). Web. *JSTOR*. 3 Oct. 2014.

——. "Shaking Hands with Other People's Pain: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*." *Mosaic* 46.1 (2013): 19–36. Print.

Spiegelman, Art. "What the %$#! Happened to Comics?" Melbourne Town Hall. 8 Oct. 2013. Public lecture.

Wallman, Sam, and Nick Olle. "At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard's Story." *The Global Mail*. The Global Mail, Feb. 2014. Web. 31 Mar. 2014.

World Comics Finland. "A Guard's Story: Comic on Australian Refugee Detention Centres." *comics-with-attitude.blogspot.com.au*. n.p., 3 Mar. 2014. Web. 22 Feb. 2016.