

Book Reviews

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David Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*.  
Liverpool UP, xi + 235. US\$95.00.

Emma Lazarus' noble words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty—"Give me . . . [t]he wretched refuse of your teeming shore"—proclaim a welcome never realized in American law, revealing a disparity between hospitable ideal and cruel reality analyzed in David Farrier's ambitious, theoretically dense study of the asylum seeker as a legally and conceptually eccentric figure who both invokes and defies national jurisdiction. Jurisdiction means the flexible area within which a rule of law applies and has authority to speak ("juris-diction"); laws speak in an imperative language which, in a post-structuralist view, is always unruly. Farrier shows how this unruliness, if properly summoned, can provide a means of ethical challenge and resistance. When refugees claim the sanctuary of a country promising the freedom and justice denied in the oppressive regimes that they flee, people in the West smugly assume the safe haven must be their own home. For Farrier, however, the "aporia of sanctuary" (155) means indefinite internment in a "camp *dispositif*," making the asylum seeker "the new subaltern who initiates the step beyond postcolonial discourse" (5). To take this step, Farrier has to lay the theoretical ground, and he does so in a sinuous, enthusiastic, taxing argument.

"[W]hat is the place of the asylum seeker before the law?" (10) he asks, when such nomads are detained in camps within or beyond national borders, outside the law that confines them to a no-man's land. *Postcolonial Asylum* maps this strange place in order to affirm a "minoritarian agency" arising deviously within it. To this end it enlists a phalanx of theoretical heavies—Spivak, Agamben, Rancière, Bhabha, Bigo, Mbembe, and many more—whom Farrier marshals in sentences that sometimes read like scholarly bravado: Bigo's account of "the Ban-opticon *dispositif*" (14) adapted from Foucault via Althusser provides a "reading of the present-day surveillance landscape, as it incorporates Agamben's understanding of the ban that merges with "Mbembe's necropolitics" (14) in a way that is typically Rancièrean" (15). I confess to a little compressing here, but Farrier's prose, accompanied by a thicket of footnotes, is not for the faint-hearted. The danger of theorizing so intensely is that it can turn real suffering into abstraction, torture into necropolitics, people into "essentialized portraits of subjective migrant experience" (19). Farrier guards against this danger by

drawing on case histories from asylum seekers' letters (the "Nauru epistolarium" (16)) as well as an enormous range of novels, plays, poems, films, documentaries, protests, performances and installations, drawn mostly from Britain and Australia. For the most part, though, these forms view asylum seekers from a safe critical distance, as they must, since the camp *dispositif* is legally and ethically enigmatic, and enigmas cannot be articulated from within, only pestered from without.

It is hard to read this book without drowning in it, because Farrier is so fervent in devising a political phenomenology to expose the *aporia* of legal sovereignty. Thus chapter three explores the resistant power of "iterative self-staging" (22, 94) by filtering Bhabha's revision of Fanon through Zygmunt Bauman's reading of Derrida's theory of hospitality, as displayed in selected texts. If I belabor this point, it is because *Postcolonial Asylum* risks falling victim to its own dazzling expertise. It is so successful in revealing how sovereign power reduces asylum seekers to abject, invisible, silent, "infrahuman" victims, that all opposing gestures seem feeble, discernable only to an astute academic. Again and again Farrier circles his prey, probing the uncanny space of exception variously characterized as an "inclusive exclusion," a "threshold of indistinction," a "fetishization of emptiness" (66) an "avidly presuppositional" (37) kenosis, and so on. How is one to escape from this trap in the name of an indefinable justice beckoning from "the *end* of infinite responsibility" (145; emphasis in original) which no law can articulate? Post-structural and post-colonial critiques are not enough, because the same rhetorical/logical/psychological twists used to deconstruct this oppressive ideology also sustain the camp as a permanent state of exception: "Deterritorialized sovereignty, by its appropriation of contradiction, acts as much through the fragmentation and qualification of the concept of refuge and its attendant terminology" (155) as do its opponents. Every objection seems to have been forestalled.

Nevertheless, resistance emerges from this legal limbo both theoretically and, in a more doubtful way, practically. Theoretically, it emerges by deconstructing the "aesthetics of the camp" (64) that is, by showing how its ideological self-justification relies on perverse modes of vision and hearing, on liminal sites and dramatic staging; and by pestering their perversity until it releases a resurgent, minoritarian agency. Practically, resistance emerges through the accusatory, ironic, but especially and pathetically, the sacrificial gestures made by asylum seekers. Their "iterative self-staging" appears in fleeing, attempting suicide, or in one horrific case, falling from the undercarriage of an airplane in flight. Through these desperate performances, which expose the despair beneath a generous ideal, subalternity finds a voice to engage in "real politics," which means "taking possession of a subject posi-

tion” (95) that rises above bare existence to affirm a resolute presence even in the midst of absence.

There is a danger here, too, which Farrier recognizes and resists with theoretic fervor. Can his deft etymological analysis of words like “hospitality,” “host” and “asylum” expose “the state’s ontological crisis regarding asylum seekers” (159) in ways that will influence opinion beyond the academy? Farrier contends that we understand asylum only through the narratives told about it and the laws written to define it, in which case discourse, however unruly, is a viable place to start. It can counter the camp *dispositif* by linking an ethics of hospitality (another rich Derridean enigma) to an ethics of reading (which acknowledges the unreadable), thereby imagining a new “mode of political belonging that resembles Rancièrian dissensus . . . where rights express the inherent alterity in the polis” (145). This disaggregated, utopian collectivity in which all are welcome sounds like a benevolent, anarchic opposite of the camp *dispositif*, but whereas the latter is all too real, the former sounds suspiciously like an aesthetic vision – hospitality turning life into a form of art.

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Sara Wasson and Emily Alder, eds. *Gothic Science Fiction 1980–2010*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2011. Pp. xix, 219. £65.00.

*Gothic Science Fiction 1980–2010* (published by Liverpool University Press’ Science Fiction Texts and Studies Series) is a timely collection of eleven essays on works that combine the “disturbing affective lens” and “confined or claustrophobic environment[s]” of the Gothic mode (Wasson and Alder 2) with the cognitive estrangement of science fiction to explore the troubled boundaries of bodies and nations in the last three decades. Focusing on recent films, TV series, short stories, novels, graphic novels, and a trading card game, these essays make a compelling case for the hybrid genre of Gothic science fiction, showing how it is particularly attuned to the impacts of increasingly invasive technologies and complex globalized politico-economic networks.

Editors Sara Wasson and Emily Alder situate the collection amongst “the ‘hyphenated’ Gothics that have abounded in recent years” (7) as critics attempt to historicize Gothic studies, but it can be placed just as easily in the context of recent efforts to historicize science fiction studies. The collection’s move to examine the relatedness of the Gothic and science fiction has the potential to reinvigorate criticism of both. Divided into three sections—