Under The Skin

An Ahmedian perspective on the participants’ emotions of disgust and pain in *Go Back To Where You Came From*

Neil Gosser-Duncan
Contents

Introduction .............................................................................................................. 3
The programme in context......................................................................................... 5
Disgust: proximity and recoil.................................................................................... 9
  Raye ......................................................................................................................... 11
  Darren .................................................................................................................... 12
  Raquel x3 ................................................................................................................ 13
  Darren and Roderick ............................................................................................... 19
Pain: shared surfaces .............................................................................................. 20
  Raye, Raquel and Maisara I .................................................................................... 21
  Roderick and Bahati ............................................................................................... 22
  Raye, Raquel and Maisara II .................................................................................. 23
  Darren, Gleny and Adam at Villawood Detention Centre ..................................... 23
Summary .................................................................................................................. 25
  Disgust .................................................................................................................... 25
  Pain ......................................................................................................................... 26
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 26
References ................................................................................................................. 28
Introduction

More than 30 million people around the world have fled their homes. It’s one of the big issues of our time, so what better way to understand the refugee experience than by living it? (Dr David Corlett, guide in Go Back To Where You Came From)

An article entitled “Passions and Powers: Emotions and Globalisation” appeared in a special issue of Identities: Global Studies in Power and Culture in 2007, and in it, Maruška Svašek and Zlatko Skrbiš articulated the case for viewing emotions as social processes rather than distorting internalized states, and consequently for studying the emotional dimensions of power relations. Svašek and Skrbiš ask how people deal with movement of individuals across borders – both their own and that of others, in diverse roles, from refugees and guest workers, to tourists. What happens when they come into contact with the unfamiliar? How does globalisation impinge on people emotionally, especially in terms of how they are affected by global economic processes? (371-2)

Svašek and Skrbiš argue that the literature on globalisation had, at the time of writing in 2007, failed to address the role of emotions in any specific way, pointing out on the one hand that emotions had not been explicitly problematized, and on the other that emotions had been viewed as reactive add-ons in discussions of social reality rather than as central and integral to them. Acknowledging the complexities of empirical study, they identified the movement of (1) people, (2) ideas/practices, and (3) objects/images, as useful dimensions for examining emergent themes in the study of emotions and globalisation (Svašek and Skrbiš, 372).
In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed approaches how people “cope emotionally with change brought about by transnational forces” (Svašek and Skrbiš, 372) by analyzing texts circulating in the public domain. Ahmed offers us a new methodology for a reading of the emotionality of texts. Her model of the sociality of emotions represents an opportunity to develop such a discussion of emotions and mobility, precisely because Ahmed notes that the word ‘emotion’ itself derives from the Latin *emovere* meaning ‘to move, to move out’, that movement and attachment are central to our relationships with others, indeed that “emotions may involve ‘being moved’ for some precisely by fixing others as ‘having’ certain characteristics” (11). In focusing on the relationships between emotions, language and bodies, she provides us with a lens with which to approach and investigate the emotional responses of Australians to refugees and asylum-seekers. This essay argues that an Ahmadian lens of emotion can be applied to the emotions, language and bodies of the participants in *Go Back To Where You Came From*, individuals who are affected by the transnational movements of others. During the course of the series, there are understandably a range of emotions on display. Disgust and pain, however, share a preoccupation with surface and proximity, and they provide a useful metaphor for what we can see in the emotionality of the participants.

Ahmed’s explicit use of the ideas of surface, proximity and movement give rise to the title of this essay: Under the Skin. To get under the skin of a person can mean to reach or display a deep understanding of that person. Alternatively, it can mean to annoy or irritate someone intensely; or to fill someone’s mind in a compelling or persistent way. A fourth meaning refers to a degree of authenticity in contrast to a person’s apparent nature or outward appearance. Common to all is the metaphor of skin as a surface, with
“under” communicating a sense of nearness. Two of these meanings, however, explicitly address an essence beneath a surface, whereas the other two address focus more on relational consequences arising from the presence of an external object beneath the surface. This is an essay about surfaces, proximity and relational consequences.

*Go Back To Where You Came From* is an Australian documentary/reality show in which participants are given the opportunity to experience what the life of a refugee and asylum seeker can be like, albeit edited and packaged for an audience. During the course of the three hour-long programmes, the six individuals not only have the chance to get under the skin of a refugee in terms of achieving a greater degree of insight into what being a refugee really means, but also to get under the viewing audience’s skins in perhaps all or any of the first three senses described above. Moreover, the refugees participating in the series may “get under the skin” of the programme participants, and the television audience, in the sense of irritating them or compellingly pre-occupying them.

**The programme in context**

“Boat people” continue to make their way to Australia on overcrowded, barely seaworthy vessels, in spite of Australia’s restrictive policy on reception and treatment of asylum seekers. Mandatory detention centres have been in place since the Keating Labor government introduced them in 1992 (Freeman). As can be seen from the opening credits, both the current Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are unequivocal about “stop[ping] the boats” (*Go Back ep 1, 0:13*). Media coverage of the asylum seekers’ shipwrecks and loss of life, in addition to that of the self-harm incidents
and riots by detainees at detention centres, has ensured that the issue has remained in the public gaze, making and keeping it topical and controversial.

The primary text to be examined in this essay is itself a contribution to the media coverage of the issue. *Go Back To Where You Came From* aired on three consecutive nights on the Australian Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) network in June 2011 and made a considerable impression in the media landscape in Australia, becoming the number one trending topic on Twitter worldwide on the night of its premiere, and the network’s most watched show during 2011, with audiences of over 500 000 each night. The series rated an article in the *New York Times*¹ and was also shown on public service television here in Sweden in July 2012, perhaps evidence of a content that transcends the Australian context.

In *Go Back*, six Australians journey in the footsteps of refugees and asylum seekers. Their journey, however, is undertaken in reverse: from meeting with boat people and refugees in resettlement sites in Australia, through a boat journey, and transit in Malaysia, to sites of first refuge in Kenya and Jordan, and ultimately to just those places the refugees and asylum seekers have fled from, namely, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This essay will examine the participants’ emotionality during this journey and show that bringing them close to these refugees and asylum seekers not only results in the sensuous experience of disgust, but also that of the sociality of pain.


²For more information about the selection process, the reader is referred to an online article by Amber Jamieson, http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/06/23/talent-scouting-for-sbs-hit-on-the-fck-off-were-full-facebook-page/
When asked, commissioning editor Peter Newman was in no doubt about the reason for making the first series:

... because the debate that surrounds refugee asylum seekers coming to Australia is probably the hottest topic of debate in Australia today, and we really wanted to get in to that debate ... and make a documentary that explores the national debate but in a way that we can engage a broad audience in those issues. (SBS World News Australia, 13 June 2011)

In other words, the makers of the programme wanted to achieve a degree of proximity that would allow them to “engage” a broad audience. They wanted to “touch” the consciousness of a group. It could also be expressed in terms of “humanizing the problem”: to present the problem in human terms to an audience in a format that the audience could “feel close” to, that of the reality show.

Does its construction as a media event mitigate any observations that can be made, any inferences that can be drawn? The makers do not deny that the programme is a construction. Series director, Ivan O’Mahoney, acknowledged that it was a “social experiment” in which they constructed experiences for people (SBS World News Australia, 23 June 2011). What motivates such an experiment? When asked if he hoped that the programme might lead to a change in Australia’s asylum policy, O’Mahoney reveals that the makers wanted to “wrestle this debate from politicians and put it back to where I think it belongs, which is with ordinary Australians. ... it’s ... highly polarized” (SBS World News Australia, 23 June 2011).
Are the so-called “ordinary” Australians ordinary? Does the construction of the social experiment lie in the judicious selection\(^2\) of the participants? They appear to present a reasonably mixed cross-section of adult Australians: three females, three males, ranging in age from early twenties to early sixties; one unemployed, one retired, four in diverse forms of employment – lifeguard, financial planner/politician, music teacher, businessman/former soldier. Commissioning editor Newman explains that they (the programme makers) wanted

> to cast people that were bringing a real kind of issue to the debate ... and to create this sort of microcosm of the national debate and put that through this reverse refugee journey to see how these various facets of the debate unfolded (SBS World News Australia, 13 June 2011).

Raquel lives in Blacktown, in western Sydney, an area increasingly being populated by people from the Horn of Africa. Raye lives opposite a detention centre for refugees and asylum seekers. Adam was present at the race riots on Cronulla Beach in 2005. Roderick is an aspiring politician who will have to confront this issue, and Darren is a parent who questions the sense of responsibility of adults who put the lives of themselves and their children at risk. Gleny, the music teacher, alone represents what may be termed a refugee-sympathetic position at the outset of the series. In a talk given at La Trobe University in March 2013, the academic authority figure who acts as guide in the show, Dr David Corlett, observes that five of the six participants belong to those 40% of Australians who are “hostile to the rights of asylum seekers”\(^3\), and were cast “precisely because of their extreme hard-line attitudes”.


\(^3\) Corlett refers earlier in the same talk to research done by Andrew Marcus at Monash University, which estimates that approximately 20% of the Australian populations are supportive of the rights of asylum seekers, approximately 40% are undecided or confused, and the remaining 40% are “hostile”.

---
Corlett acknowledges that an average Australian cannot really experience all that being a refugee entails, and that the participants knew that they would be returned to their normal lives after their refugee-like experience, but also asserts that “the participants’ reactions were not manufactured” (his emphasis).

Is a television series amenable to research on emotion? Ahmed makes the point that “... research on emotions should embrace the multiple ways emotions work, whether in public culture or everyday life, and this means working with a range of different materials” (19). She also points out that the publicness of emotions means that we learn to recognize their signs in the form of gestures, action and intonation. Thus an emotion need not be named specifically in order for a text to be readable in terms of that emotion (Ahmed 19). The text material considered here must therefore be seen as an opportunity sample of material that Ahmed would characterise as “out there” (19). Although things said or done by the participants which did not make the final cut are obviously inaccessible for study, it is possible, however, to examine the emotions they did share with the audience.

**Disgust: proximity and recoil**

According to Ahmed, our experience of disgust depends on contact and “proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects” (85). Objects which cause us to feel disgust, do not of themselves possess a quality of ‘being offensive’, when they are apart from us. It is the physical nearness of the object to the body which generates “an unpleasant
intensity” (85), which is felt as offensive. This nearness to the object is what makes it possible for us to feel disgusted.

As a result, while disgust over takes the body, it also takes over the object that apparently gives rise to it. The body is over taken precisely insofar as it takes the object over, in a temporary holding onto the detail of the surface of the object: its texture; its shape and form; how it clings and moves. It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so 'offensive' that it sickens and over takes the body. (Ahmed 85, original italics)

The role of the senses – sight, hearing smell, touch and taste – are important in any discussion of disgust. They are dependent on varying degrees of proximity: touch and taste presume little or no physical distance to an object or surface, while impulses to the other three can be experienced from greater distances. Thus the physical touch of an “other”, or coming into contact with a surface that an “other” has touched, may cause a person to feel disgust, as may the consumption of unfamiliar food prepared by “others”. Likewise, though perhaps not as self-evident, is the coming into contact with “other”, unfamiliar smells or sounds which make their way into the orifices of nose and ears. Given that humans can see others before they can touch, taste or smell them, one can ask what constitutes the proximity for visual disgust. Arguably, the discussion of proximity and contact becomes slightly more complicated when it comes to sight. Coming close enough to an object or a surface to experience the unpleasant intensity is, however, only part of the experience of disgust.

“The body recoils from the object; it pulls away ... The movement is the work of disgust; it is what disgust does. Disgust brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence. ... That distancing requires proximity is crucial to the intercorporeality of the disgust encounter.” (Ahmed 85)

There is an aspect of the recoil that reminds of the motion parallax phenomenon: it is that the subject, in moving back, feels as if the object has moved towards the body rather
than the body having got close enough to the object. Thus the physical closeness of the disgusting object may, as Ahmed puts it, “feel like an offence to bodily space, as if the object’s invasion of that space was a necessary consequence of what seems disgusting about the object itself.... To be disgusted is after all to be affected by what one has rejected.” (Ahmed 85-6, original italics)

Contact and proximity between participants and the various refugees they meet are characteristic features of all three episodes. Their emotional relationship is built on proximity, and the images we are shown develop this proximal relationship, although the forms and settings may vary. In addition to the establishment of the contact and proximity necessary to the experience of disgust in the six examples which follow, one can also discern “a pulling away”.

Raye
Although Raquel, more than any other participant, “embodies” the emotion of disgust throughout the series, the first episode begins by introducing Raye, the retired social worker, to the viewers in this sequence:

NARRATOR: Raye Colby’s comfort zone is a small farm in the Adelaide Hills. RAYE: It’s just so peaceful, you’ve got your own space and you’re sort of like in a little Utopia. NARRATOR: Raye thought she was living in paradise until the neighbors moved in. RAYE: This is the beautiful Inverbrackie Detention Centre. They've got everything there. Totally refurbished. Painted. Air-conditioning. Flat-screen TVs. I could’ve gone over there with a gun and shot the lot of them. Isn't that terrible? (Go Back ep 1, 6:17)

Raye refers to her own space which is disturbed, not by the arrival of individual refugees per se, but by the presence of a building, a physical, solid object containing (and constraining) refugees. This building intrudes into Raye’s visual field, it impinges,
presses upon, her metaphorical skin, the idyllic space surrounding her home. When she says she could have gone there and shot them with a gun, she is not literal, as she concedes in her tag question. She is, however, pulling away metaphorically from the object of her disgust. In fact, the image of a gun carries a two-fold effect: the metaphorical “killing” of the detainees would effectively re-move them, and the firing of the gun entails a recoil, in which the holder of the gun is thrown backwards from the target being fired at.

**Darren**

In contrast to Raye’s discourse of violence, Darren’s disgust for asylum-seeking boat people is expressed as moral opprobrium, expressed from the comfort of his own living room, with his family watching television:

> We’re getting bombarded with boat people coming and it was only a matter of time before Christmas Island happened. Seeing children drown after their boat crashed against the rocks. It’s awful. I just couldn’t imagine putting my kids into that position so we need to send a tougher signal out that this is not on - you don’t do that. People who come here without any documentation by boat should be immediately expatriated. (Go Back ep 1, 12:12)

Darren’s language is revealing. His view is that Australia is being “bombarded”. To this ex-soldier, Australia is a target, a surface at which projectiles can be aimed. The space where Australians live, including him and his family, is threatened. As a responsible parent, it would be morally reprehensible to subject one’s children to risk. This is a practice he would not indulge in. Therefore Australians must communicate a message to asylum-seekers – what Darren’s “tougher signal” is exactly, is unclear (not board unseaworthy vessels, not bring their children?) at this point. In another, post-series, context, he draws an analogy with warning people about the risks of not wearing cycle helmets when riding a bicycle: “This is really dangerous and irresponsible, don’t do it”
(SBS World News Australia, 28 June 2011). The word “expatriate” comes from the Latin expatriare meaning to drive a person away from their native country or to banish. A generous interpretation of his use would be the latter. One suspects, however, that in the context of what Darren says during the series, what he meant was “repatriated” in the sense of the asylum seekers being returned to their native country.

The objects of Darren’s moral disgust are those people who lack identity papers and subject their children to risk. They are many or unceasing or both, as the verb “bombard” denotes a persistent form of activity. While the asylum seekers’ visual proximity to Raye is literal in the form of an ever-present building, their visual proximity to Darren is schematic and transient in the form of images on a TV screen. This responsible family man and father of two, distances himself from the objects of his disgust by self-righteously sharing his use of “expatriated” with the audience. His view is governed by a sense of what is right, of behaving in accordance with the rules. He rejects these people not because of their skin colour or their origin but because they transgressed, both in official terms and in terms of parental responsibility.

**Raquel x3**

Raquel is introduced to the viewer walking down a street in Blacktown, an outer suburb of western Sydney. Raquel talks directly to the camera, telling us she has been living in the area since she was 16 (she is now 21), and she remembers that when she first came, “there were a few Sudanese here and there”. Now, however, “They’re everywhere. You go to Blacktown and it’s really black town. They’ve just taken over. I’m probably the only white person here” *(Go Back ep 1, 15:39)*. This last remark is confided to the camera in a manner that does not bespeak fear. The framing of the images almost confirms her view;
indeed, only one other Caucasian is clearly evident in front of the camera. The sheer presence of an increased number of Africans impinges on her sense of home – “This is my country. This is my home. I was born here” (Go Back ep 1, 15:13). These people have “invaded” her space, filled her visual field. Though not a conscious choice, her everyday movements constitute an unavoidable moving towards them, and it is the colour of their skin that she focuses on. Her self-acknowledged racism is not an abstraction of an anonymous amorphous collective, it is the proximity of an increasing number of these “others” in her space on a daily basis. Her expression of disgust likens the spread of Africans to a vegetative creep – “They’re everywhere … they’ve just taken over” She is unambiguous yet abstract and generalized in her views: “If it was up to me and I was in charge, I’d send them back to their country. That’s where they’d be going back to. Their country. They shouldn’t be staying here”. (Go Back ep 1, 16:12) Raquel’s rejection of refugees and asylum seekers at this stage remains hypothetical, a kind of wishful thinking. Her words are more direct than Darren’s “expatriated” but they mean the same, and they distance her from the objects of her disgust.

Dinner with the Masudi family in Albury-Wodonga sets the performativity of disgust in motion for Raquel. The word “disgust” itself stems from Italian and Old French for bad taste, and food is particularly important to the discussion here not simply because of the literal sensual involvement of both taste and touch, but because it enters the body. As Ahmed explains, because we must eat to survive, eating renders us “vulnerable in that it requires that we let what is ‘not us’ in” (83). Raquel’s hosts, Bahati and Maisara prepare a traditional meal, served in traditional manner – entailing a different way of washing hands, eating with your fingers, and no alcohol. The Australian visitors are all polite, in their role as guests in someone else’s space, but Raquel is anxious: she murmurs that
doesn't like fish (Go Back ep 1, 18:50). She nevertheless proceeds to assure her hosts otherwise: “Oh, actually, I really like the green stuff and I like the mince and I like the fish. I like it all” before revealing the opposite to camera afterwards, “I didn't really like their food but I didn't want to say that. I didn't want to be rude. I don’t like African people anyway so it was kind of hard to pretend to be nice” (Go Back ep 1, 19:32).

In this situation for Raquel, the proximity necessary to disgust is literal: the three Australians have entered the Masudi home. They are a large family: the two parents and five boys ranging from 16 to toddler twins. The presence of three adult visitors renders the living conditions somewhat cramped. In such a situation, physical proximity is paramount, and physical contact unavoidable. Raquel, together with her compatriots, has to sit down in the presence of “others”, and not only eat food that has been prepared by their hands, but to take it in her hands, to touch it, to take it into her own body. Something that has come from the Masudis is absorbed physically, and later, though she does not literally vomit the food, the words which come out of her mouth are arguably metaphorical vomit, a rejection of their hospitality. Circumstances have brought her close to people that she says she does not like: politeness enables her to approach and consume the food they serve her but she recoils afterwards in the remarks she makes to the camera. One can make a case for Raquel’s apparent politeness being seen as a surface, a veneer which she uses to try to keep her distance, to prevent her hospitable hosts from “getting under her skin”. As there can be no possible grounds for conflict, the Masudis are not to be feared. The emotion at work here is one of disgust, borne of proximity, and is focused primarily through Raquel’s sense of taste.
In the above two examples of Raquel’s disgust, the afflicted senses are those of sight and taste. In episode two, the list of senses underpinning her disgust will be augmented to include those of smell and touch. In this episode, the six participants are flown to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, to experience the life of refugees in transit. They live with some Chin refugees from Burma in very cramped living conditions, in which the children cannot leave the building, as they are at risk of being imprisoned by the authorities. The sleeping conditions deny any individual privacy as everyone sleeps on the floor next to each other, in such a way that physically touching others is also unavoidable.

The sequence below exemplifies the performativity of disgust in another form when Kennedy, their Chin host, is showing them around the living quarters, which are shared by 50 people, and now six Australians:

RAYE: Kennedy, where do people shower?
KENNEDY: They just use this toilet for showering.
GLENY: There’s just one shower rose for 50 people.

... 
RAYE: ... Very primitive, isn’t it? ...
RAQUEL: I don’t know if youse can smell it but there’s an odour here, very unhygienic odour in the bathroom. And it... just smells. (Go Back ep 2, 8:58)

The sequence continues with Raquel needing to use the toilet

RAQUEL: I feel sorry for them having to sleep all here and stuff but I’m not too impressed I have to stay here with them. And this is quite disgusting. This is beyond hygiene for me. I need to go to the toilet now and I don’t want to use that toilet. And I’m not going to eat their food. ... (Go Back ep 2, 11:17)

Nature, however, will not be denied and Raye reveals that Raquel “[She]’s desperate. She has to. She’s got her Dettol (a disinfectant) and she’s got lots of tissues and she is going to wipe it all down” (Go Back ep 2, 12:17).
The disgust which began with the eating of others’ food is now no longer a matter of polite choice. Going to the toilet is a matter of necessity. The intake of “unhygienic odour” there cannot be regulated by Raquel, thus a visit to the toilet is effectively to approach the smell of 50 others, and allow their smell to “enter” her nostrils. Although this may seem a literal interpretation, Raquel actually uses the word “disgusting” to describe her situation. It clearly refers to the Chin refugees, as her confide-to-camera attitude implies that the Australian viewers would concur with her.

Raye’s remarks about Dettol and tissues draw our attention to a different kind of proximity, that of touch. Going to the toilet in your own home may involve your exposed skin sharing the same toilet seat (not simultaneously) with a relatively small number of other individuals. The toilet seat prevents the sitter’s skin from coming into contact with the surface of the toilet bowl rim and the possibility of contamination. The toilet here which Raquel is loath to use lacks a toilet seat, and thus she is confronted with a physiological need that will place her skin in direct contact with a surface which has been contaminated by 50 others. Thus the Dettol and tissues are her attempts to recoil from such contact: to disinfect the surface and wipe away contaminants from others. While Raquel is not alone in showing and verbalizing her disgust, she is undoubtedly the most demonstrative, as becomes apparent in the overwhelming of her senses when confronted with living in Kakuma, the UNHCR Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, home to 84 000 refugees.

Here Raye, Roderick and Raquel finding themselves in the temporary processing section of one of the world’s largest tent cities. This represents a considerable escalation of scale for all three Australians: when they first entered the Masudi home in Albury-Wodonga
in episode one, Raye had asked Raquel how she was feeling, and Raquel had replied that that she felt "... out of place. Uncomfortable" to which Raye had whispered "It's a lot of people in one house isn't it?" (Go Back ep 2, 17:14) In episode two, in the Chin's flat in Kuala Lumpur, Gleny, Raye and Raquel had shown incredulity in the dialogue exchange about there being 50 occupants in the flat (Go Back ep 2, 7:11 onwards), which preceded the sequence about using the toilet without a seat. In Kakuma, the three Australians, and in all probability the camera team, constitute the visual ("white") aberrations in a ("black") landscape, and are constantly stared at. Unsurprisingly, the disgust is once again connected to the bodily functions of eating and going to the toilet, but sleeping and showering have now been added:

RAQUEL: What the fuck is this shit? Mud all over me fucking shoes. And I don't want to be here. I don't want to sleep in there with all these people. Everyone looking at me. I don't feel comfortable. I don't want to be here. I don't want to eat this food. I don't want to shower however they shower. I don't want to go to the toilet however they go. I just don't want to do it. (Go Back ep 2, 51:00)

Raquel utters the words "I don't want to" on six occasions in the opening sequence of the dialogue quoted above, all relating to her body being in a state of proximity to a conglomeration of objects that may “touch” her: being “here” is being surrounded by 84,000 Africans at a camp which fences the occupants in, pressing them all closer together; sleeping with all these people may not involve the same form of closeness as in the apartment in Kuala Lumpur, but as Raye remarks “It’s really close, stuffy in here” (Go Back ep 2, 52:00). Having their own sleeping area, in a low-ceilinged building that bears a distinct resemblance to a factory-farm, is of little comfort to Raquel. She then rejects eating, showering, and going to the toilet, the last two specifically being linked to a “they” which refers to the refugees. She, her body, is recoiling at being pressed upon by the nearness of all these others. The sequence culminates in her breaking down. She
goes on to articulate her disgust by remarking on difference – “I’m not a refugee...” (*Go Back ep 2, 53:28*) distancing herself from the objects whose proximity has pressed on her body's surface, and contrasting them with the familiar spaces of home and her upbringing there.

**Darren and Roderick**

The early morning Muezzin calls to prayer provoke responses from Darren and Roderick:

> DARREN: ... It’s the noise from the street... cars, traffic, horns. Now the bloody Muslims are starting their prayers. Probably not the best sleep I’ve had. ... (*Go Back ep 2, 14:40*)
> [...]  
> ADAM: It’s a Muslim country.  
> RODERICK: Yeah, I know it’s a Muslim country but that doesn’t mean you get to blurt out your prayers and wake up entire neighborhoods.  
> ADAM: Well, it does. (*Go Back ep 2, 15:52*)

For both Darren and Roderick, the calls to prayer bring them, to use Ahmed's words, “perilously close to an object” (the religion of the ‘other’, Islam), only for them then “to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence” (Ahmed 85) by expressing to the camera that the sounds are unwelcome intrusions into their aural space. The Muslimness in the form of sound which cannot be avoided impinges on them, and they recoil verbally – “bloody Muslims are starting their prayers” and “blurt out your prayers” – they distance themselves from the object through the words which come out of their mouths. It is as if they use their own sounds to shut out the sounds which they do not wish to hear: in the insulated comfort of the mini-van, their words push away the sound that would otherwise enter the vehicle, they reject it.
Pain: shared surfaces

In this chapter the emotion of pain will be examined. Pain, too, is premised on the notions of touch and surfaces. As Ahmed points out, the contingency of pain is linked both to its dependence on other elements, and also to touch. ... Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being 'with' others, of getting close enough to touch. ... what attaches us, what connects us ... to this other or that other is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel(28).

The experience of pain will also be seen to be social. In the examples of pain which follow, what Ahmed calls the "sociality of pain" (28), is apparent. Although pain may be experienced as individual and private, Ahmed maintains that “that privacy is linked to the experience of being with others” (29). It is possible to see what she means by

the impossibility of inhabiting the other's body creates a desire to know 'what it feels like'. To turn this around, it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others. So while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. (29)

In the examples which follow, in which refugees speak about their pain, the participants will bear witness to it, and be moved, and this will in turn be witnessed by us the audience, and make us feel. Under what conditions can this pain be expressed and witnessed?

According to Ahmed, pain involves the sociality of bodily surfaces (including the surfaces of objects) that 'surface' in relationship to each other. Some of these encounters involve moments of collision. Here, the surface comes to be felt as an intense 'impression' of objects and others. Not all pain involves injuries of this sort. Even in instances of pain that is lived without an external injury (such as psychic pain), pain 'surfaces' in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence. (31)
Arguably, the construction of the programme brings about moments of collision for the participants, when they spend time together with refugees in enclosed or proximal spaces, whether it be in the Masudi home or the detention centre. As Raye, Raquel and Roderick and the Masudis get to know each other, the Masudis can tell the story of how they came to Australia, and in this social context, reveal the pain they have undergone.

In the Villawood Detention Centre, Adam, Darren and Gleny are confronted with detainees whose pain is ongoing. The meetings, whilst not involving direct physical contact, make an intense impression on the participants.

**Raye, Raquel and Maisara**

In this sequence, which takes place in the Masudi’s home, Maisara describes what life was like for her in the transit camp after fleeing from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She tells of losing a daughter, sharing this personal loss and anguish with her guests.

**Maisara:** Yeah. You are going to see the doctor. When the doctor finishes the check-up, he tell you to go and buy Panadol, … something like that and you say I don’t have money. And he say if you don’t have money what do you want me to do? And then I lost my baby like that because I don’t have money. I don’t have something. It’s dying. Before Felix, I have a small daughter. Is dying.

**Raquel:** You seem to have went (sic) through a lot while you were over in your … the country. *(Go Back ep 1, 20:30)*

Raquel endeavours to sympathize in saying what she says, struggling with what Ahmed would describe as the “impossibility of inhabiting the other’s body” (29), while Raye appears to be genuinely moved because it transpires that Raye herself inhabits a body that has experienced the loss of a child/ren.

**Raye:** I had no idea it was so bad. I mean, to have a sick baby and because she’s got no money and the baby dies? How do you how you live with that? It’s not … it’s not easy for me to hear that, um, I have a lot of trouble, um, carrying pregnancies through and, um, … (sobs) so I yeah I do understand where she’s coming from. I know how hard it is to … to move on. *(Go Back ep 1, 21:27)*
Here both Raquel and Raye receive an intense impression of Maisara’s pain and “bear witness” to it, but while Maisara can articulate her pain and her words can be absorbed by Raquel and Raye, her husband Bahati struggles to express his pain in conversation with Roderick.

**Roderick and Bahati**

When Bahati and Roderick sit at a table outside drinking coffee at the university, they find that they have a common interest in politics. Their political engagement has vastly contrasting consequences for each of them. Bahati is a refugee precisely because of his politics; he has suffered for his beliefs:

BAHATI: And then ... they take me in the prison for six months. And give a torture for everywhere. I have the wound here, everywhere. (Pointing to various parts of his body)
RODERICK: And they tortured you there?
BAHATI: More and more. I have the wound here and here. Leg and face. They put me in the hospital. I stay in hospital for two weeks.
RODERICK: Mmm. What ... what did they ... ? Do you feel comfortable talking about what they did or...?
BAHATI: Oh, it’s not comfortable.
RODERICK: It’s not difficult?
BAHATI: It’s not comfortable.
RODERICK: It is very difficult. Yeah. And ... *(Go Back ep 1, 30:57)*

Maisara’s pain and the scars which cause her pain are primarily psychological, whereas Bahati’s torture may have left him with both physical and psychological scarring. The impossibility of inhabiting Bahati’s body arouses Roderick’s curiosity – the desire to know what it feels like – but Bahati’s emotional wounds are not fully healed and he cannot talk about it further, leaving Roderick in a position of not knowing what to say. The three dots are where he trails off and looks away. The cameras keep rolling and there are 14 seconds of silence. This limited sharing of pain by Bahati nevertheless
creates an intense impression that what he cannot speak of is “unspeakable”, which "moves" Roderick, and leaves him speechless.

**Raye, Raquel and Maisara II**
On the third evening of their visit, Maisara talks to Raye and Raquel about her experiences in the Congo before fleeing to Burundi. Maisara is reclining on a bed and Raquel and Raye are sitting on the same bed. All three are sharing the same surface, in what can be seen as an emotionally intimate setting – the proximal distance between all of them is negligible. In fact, Raquel appears to be as physically close to Maisara as she can be without actually their bodies actually touching continuously.

When Maisara describes the assault on her family and the rape of her two younger sisters (*Go Back ep 1, 35:50*), Raquel and Raye say very little, and they would probably concede that there is little one can say when hearing Maisara's anguished testimony, the camera witnesses their reactions to Maisara sharing her pain: her words move on Raquel and Raye, and move them.

**Darren, Gleny and Adam at Villawood Detention Centre**
Darren, Gleny and Adam spend their initial time in Sydney with a group of Iraqis who have arrived in Australia by boat, and have been found to be “genuine” refugees. These refugees accompany the participants to Villawood Immigration Detention Centre because Wasmi, their host, wants them to meet some of his asylum-seeking friends who are being detained there. The cameras are not allowed to accompany the group on their visit. However, in the sequence which is shot outside the gates of the centre (*Go Back ep...*)
1, 33:45-35:18) when they exit two hours later, the three participants are all visibly moved.

Though their reactions differ, what they have seen and heard has made a deep impression. Darren says he cannot speak because he needs time to “process and digest” (33:53) this experience. He has come into contact with asylum-seekers being detained and witnessed something that he has to take in. Someone has shared something with him which touches him. Gleny may be more specific in what she says but she too, is upset. She appears to be holding back tears while speaking to camera. She refers to Rad, a young man she spoke with. When she uses the words “just hearing his personal story”, “to be in his presence”, “to feel the helplessness ...” (34:13-34:16, italics all mine), we can appreciate that she has witnessed someone in pain: his words have touched her, they have shared a space, a space that he has allowed her to enter, and she has been moved by his sharing of his psychic pain. She concludes with the words “Very emotional” (34:36). While she is speaking, the camera shifts to Adam twice (at 34:12 and again at 34:28-32), who seems to be upset. In fact, his first words are “Shook me up a bit” (34:36) suggesting that his psychological disposition has been moved. “To hear that sort of stuff” (34:51) communicates to us that the words of the person he spoke to have entered into Adam’s consciousness, his space. The words have literally touched him, and “knock[ed him] about a bit” (34:52). The asylum-seeker has “open[ed] up and [told him] his feelings,” (34:54) revealing if not an emotional scar, a psychic wound. All three participants, in bearing witness to the camera, “authenticate the existence” of the detainees’ pain, to use Ahmed’s words (31).
Summary

Disgust
In all six examples of disgust, we can speak of contact between the surfaces of bodies and objects, whether it be that of the Inverbrackie Detention Centre literally being too close to Raye's home, the physical presence of Africans in Blacktown being too close to Raquel, or the toilet bowl in the apartment building in Kuala Lumpur touching Raquel's skin. In Darren's case, it is the television images of children drowning and other boat disasters that he figuratively comes into contact with, and the calls to prayer in Kuala Lumpur are sounds that register on Darren and Roderick's "surfaces". As Ahmed points out, it is not that the object of itself is offensive, it is that it is sufficiently close to induce a feeling of disgust.

Ahmed speaks of a sensuous element in disgust. The physical senses are paramount in our examples: the visual fields of Raye, Raquel and Darren are filled with objects, Raquel's mouth, nose and skin, Darren and Roderick's ears. Our senses are in effect membranes, surfaces through which we have contact with the world. Disgust, however, continues beyond the point of contact in a movement away from the object that gives rise to it. In considering the examples here, we can view the movement away – the recoil – in a literal and/or a figurative (verbal) sense. Raye puts her disgust into words redolent of a recoil image. Darren likewise verbalizes his disgust in the form of his moral criticism. Raquel's rejection of food, showering and going to the toilet are both literal and verbal movements away from the object of disgust.
Pain
The four examples of pain all illustrate its sociality, the authentication of its existence through the proximal presence of another. Whether it is the loss of a child, the experience and memory of torture, the helplessness of witnessing rape, or the helplessness of being denied asylum and the threat of being repatriated, all six participants witness, are in the presence of, the pain expressed by another, and are visibly “moved” to console verbally or to touch, or, in Roderick’s case, to speechlessness. Regardless of whether the pain is fully or partially articulated and regardless of whether or not the listeners can respond verbally, there is a common underlying factor in all the situations described above: both parties get close enough to touch each other; this being together, this proximity enables a connection, allowing the participants to feel something, to be moved, even though they cannot literally know what the other’s pain felt like.

Conclusion

This essay demonstrates that Ahmed’s methodology, by focusing on emotion, language and bodies in terms of proximity, surfaces and impressions, is an effective tool for analysing the emotions of people “affected” by the transnational movements of others. Sensuous proximity underlies the emotion of the Go Back participants’ disgust while shared surfaces enable the participants to feel the pain of others. Proximity is a prerequisite for both. Television’s role cannot be ignored in this Australian context. Being surrounded by water effectively grants it a metaphorical skin which is approached by and occasionally penetrated by “others” seeking asylum, whether they arrive by plane or boat. Television enables viewers to approach these “others”, and for the
viewers to be over taken by them at this point of contact. In other words, the proximity of these others can be achieved through the surface of a TV screen bringing unpalatable otherness into our homes, engendering disgust in our metaphorical castles. However, as can be seen from the programme, the vicarious nature of reality television such as *Go Back* can also bring people close enough to touch and feel, to bear witness to the other’s pain, and thus to get under the skin of another.
References


O'Mahoney, Ivan. *Go Back to where you Came From part1*. 29 October 2012. 21 April 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bDly518a-k>.

—. *Go Back to where you Came From part2*. 29 October 2012. 21 April 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl4wEZ_-4ms>.

—. *Go Back to where you Came From part3*. 29 October 2012. 21 April 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzuf7xiA1r8>.


—. *SBS News - How 'Go Back To Where You Came From' was made*. 23 June 2011. World News Australia. 15 April 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5joAGcKoAU>.
