

Alex & I: Against Indifference

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Abstract

This text and photo essay concerns a series of portraits made with a community of Tamil refugees living in Bangkok who refer to themselves as ‘the Bachelors.’ The project was initiated by refugee and one-time media figure, Sanjeev ‘Alex’ Kuhendrarajah who hoped his peers would tell their own stories to an ‘international community.’ With reference to Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* (2009), I have sought to ‘discursively frame’ the images by considering the discrimination these young single men encounter living in the margins of this South Asian metropolis, awaiting the outcomes of their re-settlement applications.

This paper concerns an ongoing collaboration and friendship I have developed with the Tamil refugee and one-time media figure, Sanjeev ‘Alex’ Kuhendrarajah. It recounts a trip I made to Bangkok in July 2015 to visit him soon after he was released from immigration detention after having been incarcerated there since 2011. The paper contextualises a series of photo-portraits that were made in collaboration with a community of urban refugees of which Alex is a part. By publishing these images first in this journal, I address my anxieties about presenting these images in a culture inured to stories and images from the borderscape. This paper narrates, contextualises and, with reference to Judith Butler (2009), ‘discursively frames’ these images as a means of addressing and ultimately overcoming this perceived political inertia.

Like many others around the world, I first came to know of ‘Alex’ in October 2009 as a spokesperson for 254 Tamils fleeing the aftermath of the war in Sri Lanka which had concluded earlier that year. The asylum seekers were caught in a stand-off with Indonesian

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authorities at the port of Merak, Indonesia, after attempting to reach Australia on a small wooden cargo ship, *KM Jaya Lestari 5*. The stand-off became a media spectacle lasting six months, however Alex jumped ship before it resolved in April 2010. I first made contact with the asylum seeker in 2011 via Facebook whilst he was living as a fugitive. A year later, Alex announced his whereabouts on the social media platform with a series of smug ‘selfies’ taken with a mobile phone smuggled into a crowded cell in Bangkok and uploaded to his profile page. In 2013 I travelled to Thailand to meet Alex face-to-face after his refugee status was confirmed and we struck up a friendship across the bars that kept him in immigration detention. Alex remained incarcerated until May 2015 when he was quite suddenly granted community release, or as he puts it, ‘let out on bail.’

In July 2015 I returned to Bangkok to visit Alex, the first time we would meet since his release. I was a little anxious. What if we had nothing in common? What if we did not get along? These thoughts were dispelled when I spotted Alex grinning and waving at the Skytrain station exit. He looked healthy, tall and well built. His hair was styled with bleached highlights and he was dressed in sports clothes, all bright white and neat. It was mid-morning but already humid, so we bought some young coconuts to drink from a local street vendor before making our way across the highway to his apartment, a modest one bedroom studio—palatial in comparison to the overcrowded cells he had inhabited over the last four years.



Figure 1: ‘Alex’

As we walked and talked, Alex mentioned he was looking for some help with a photoblogging project, similar to ‘Humans of New York’¹ but concerned with the refugees of Bangkok. Being a compulsive photographer, I was relieved to have a practical, collaborative task to focus on for the few days we would spend together. We decided to immediately visit some of Alex’s friends living in an apartment block inhabited almost exclusively by refugees and asylum seekers. The following day we ventured further to Om Yai, a suburb on the outskirts of Bangkok’s urban sprawl, to spend some time with another group of refugees who had been detained with Alex in Kanchanaburi.

Over the following days we visited a number of Alex’s friends; some families, but mostly young men who ranged in age from their early twenties to early forties. They refer to themselves as ‘the Bachelors,’ a title that has some poignancy given that many countries are wary of accepting young single men, especially those involved in conflict.² We documented this excursion in several hundred images sharing a single camera. Inevitably authorship became confused, and as positions often switched between those being photographed and those handling the camera, these images should be understood as a collective effort. Having the advantages of citizenship to a modern democratic state and also being the owner of the camera, I must acknowledge the uneven distribution of power and privilege amongst our group. Nevertheless, I was a guest amongst this community and was received with generosity, patience and care. Thus, I do not believe these portraits should be considered ‘atrocious images’ (Sontag 2003, p. 88) designed to haunt or disturb, but rather as acts and evidence of friendship.

Reviewing these images I began to wonder how they might best be put to use. Certainly they document and make visible people living in the margins, but how could they improve the conditions in which they live? Could these portraits assist their subjects to be resettled? Are such photographs able to make accessible the services these people need to survive in Bangkok or would they expose them to further discrimination?

1A popular photoblogging site and book founded by Brandon Stanton in 2010. URL: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>

2Albeit a generalisation, this is an opinion held amongst many with whom I spoke in Thailand and is more recently reflected in Canada’s recent decision to restrict its intake of single male refugees from Syria (Kingsley 2015).



Figure 2: 'Alex, Giri and Abdulla'

Stephen Fitzpatrick, the journalist who broke Alex's story in the media in 2009, once told me that it is crucial that voices and stories of the marginalised are heard, especially when governments are actively trying to suppress them (Fitzpatrick 2013). In hindsight, it may have been remiss of me not to attempt to hastily publish these images through the media channels in which Alex once had some infamy, however being mindful of his earlier experiences with the press and his current precarious existence, I opted to pursue my particular interest in his narrative beyond the constraints of the news cycle.

Publishing these portraits first in the context of this journal primarily addresses my own concerns as to how they are received. Whilst I may ultimately have no control over the affects these portraits relay or the thoughts and sensations they summon, as the one who possesses the digital files I am, at least initially, responsible for their presentation and distribution. My inability to 'let the images speak for themselves' and to instead frame them 'discursively' (Butler 2009, p. 111), belies a certain caution about their reception in a culture in which representations of suffering are considered clichéd. In a society *oversaturated* with images all vying for limited attention spans, is it not reasonable to think that images that speak of the injustice of the 'borderscape'³ might be received with fatigue, indifference or

³ A term coined by Suvendrini Perera to describe the multidimensional, mobile and shifting aspects of current border regimes in contrast to the planar representations of state sovereignty on a map (Perera 2009).

worse still, cynicism? If art functions as a kind of ‘commodified persuasion’ (Adams 2007, para. 9), then the consumption of representations of the marginalised within the gated communities of the cosmopolitan centres risks their becoming ‘a pornography of poverty’ (Demos 2013, p. 123), designed to elicit certain conditioned responses—perhaps even a pleasure that arises in acknowledging the suffering of others.



Figure 3: ‘Kudgen and sons’

In a recent edition of the Australian experimental arts journal *RealTime* focused on performance and asylum, guest editor and performance scholar Caroline Wake describes how for almost fifteen years, cycles of revelation, political manipulation and media reaction to the violence of Australia’s border policies have overall led to public indifference. Wake proposes that the ‘performances’ of politicians, journalists and other concerned public figures determine ‘social scripts’ through which Australians can enact grief, guilt and ultimately apathy (Wake 2015, para. 3). If the frequency and repetition of images and stories from the margins has de-sensitised us to the precarious conditions they depict, then as Judith Butler (2009) argues, it becomes imperative that we find ethical and political positions that are able to make the lives being represented understood as ‘grievable.’ Butler claims that precariousness must be understood as a condition common to *all* life. This is evident in an absolute sense given that from the very moment of birth survival is premised upon ‘a social network of hands’ (Butler 2009, p. 24) to provide care. It is also crucial to acknowledge the

‘differential allocation of precarity’ (Butler 2009, p. 10), that global inequalities are politically structured and maintained, ensuring that our relative wellbeing in the (over)developed world is premised on lives elsewhere being exposed to more risk and instability. Considering that certain ‘epistemological frames’ (Butler 2009, p. 9) effectively render certain lives unknowable and ungrievable (think of ‘collateral deaths,’ those killed by ‘friendly fire’ or nameless ‘deaths at sea’) then the ethical and political corrective is to devise alternative or counter epistemological frames by which such ‘non-lives’ become recognisable and could be said to matter.

Anthony Downey argues that figures such as the refugee, the political prisoner and the dispossessed are exemplars of, rather than being the exception to, contemporary conditions. With the re-emergence of sovereign power blurring the boundary between the rights-bearing ‘citizen’ and the ‘merely human,’ these lives ‘half-lived’ exist in ‘zones of indistinction’ (a phrase Downey draws from Giorgio Agamben) that are both geographic and embodied (Downey 2009, p. 109). In his discussion of artworks (including photography) that represent life in the margins Downey claims that the ‘fact of discrimination’ that these artworks foreground, is ultimately common to both subjects and audiences. Thus, to be indifferent to the plight of the marginalised ‘is to be indifferent to our own potential plight’ (Downey 2009, p. 123).



Figure 4: ‘Suresh’

The discrimination that urban refugees living in Bangkok are subject to becomes most obvious when determining who is granted re-settlement and who is left to subsist in the margins. That is to say, which refugees are recognised by the regimes that administer the re-settlement process and the frames that make a certain group of refugees more recognisable—and more grievable—than others. Such frames can be perceived in an anecdote that Alex recounted for me on this recent trip.

Soon after Alex was released from immigration detention he attended a ‘Refugee Bazaar’, an annual event organised by some local non-government organisations (NGOs) at a cafe in central Bangkok. Here refugees are encouraged to sell handicrafts, artworks and food, express themselves and their culture without fear and, in Alex’s words, ‘be themselves for a day’ (Kuhendrarajah 2015). Patrons buy coupons which they exchange for the goods and services on offer, which refugees are then able to exchange for cash. It is one of the few opportunities refugees in Bangkok have to make some money.

Having bought coupons at the entrance, Alex browsed the market, received a henna tattoo, grazed on snacks and admired the handicrafts. When he went outside for a cigarette, Alex fell into a conversation with some of the gathered NGOs and expats who assumed he was one of their own. He took the opportunity to survey their thoughts about the prospects of resettlement for a single Tamil man, like himself, who was living as an urban refugee in Bangkok awaiting the outcome of his applications. The general perception was that since the war in Sri Lanka had ended in 2009, and especially since President Mahinda Rajapaksa—who had overseen the bloody defeat of the separatist movement—had been ousted in the election earlier in 2015, the country would be safe for returnees. Those Tamils remaining in Bangkok were considered the ‘last batch’ and would also be expected to leave, despite ongoing accounts of torture and the ‘dirty war’ being waged against those critical of the Sri Lankan state. One NGO who headed up a United Nations humanitarian project offered that the remaining Tamils in Thailand would be best-served finding ‘other means’ to leave the country and to make their claims elsewhere. It seems there was nothing the UNHCR in Bangkok could do for them. To reiterate, Alex was advised by the very people administering the resettlement process that he would be better off taking the ‘illegal route’ rather than ‘joining the queue’—either way was a gamble (Kuhendrarajah 2015).

After returning to Sydney, I attended a seminar to discuss the work of the Asia-Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) where I met one of the NGOs with whom Alex was speaking. APRRN is an affiliation of civil society groups and individuals operating in 26 countries and Anoop Sukamaran is its Executive Director. During the seminar he emphasised that those providing services for refugees in Thailand often operate ‘under the radar’ (Sukamaran in Refugee Council of Australia 2015). Thailand is not a signatory of the 1951 UN refugee convention and makes no provisions for refugees and asylum seekers who, like all other migrants and tourists without the correct visas, are considered ‘illegal aliens’. Regardless, the country continues to attract refugees and asylum seekers, in part due to the presence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and other informal refugee support networks. Whilst let out on bail, Alex and his community are tolerated by the grace of the Thai government, however they have no assurance that this hospitality will not be suddenly withdrawn.

Alex understands Thailand wants to clear out its overcrowded immigration detention centres, yet questions how it expects refugees to survive without resources or support (Kuhendrarajah 2015). Perhaps this is exactly the point? Once outside refugees must cover their living expenses, but are refused legal rights to work. Forced to find ways to survive, urban refugees become dependent on irregular charity, susceptible to exploitation in the unregulated labour market and vulnerable to harassment and extortion by authorities and potential criminality.



Figure 5: ‘Hillary’

As of January 2015 the UNHCR estimates there are over 14 million refugees and almost another 2 million asylum-seekers, a figure significantly higher than in previous years (UNHCR, n.d. a). In Thailand the UNHCR estimates over 100,000 refugees, almost ten thousand asylum seekers and a 'Population of Concern' of over 600,000 (UNHCR, n.d. b). The current global refugee crisis attests that there are many more stateless people than places being offered to resettle them, so what are the possible consequences?

At the APRRN seminar, Yunita Purnama a representative from the Indonesian Civil Society Network for Refugee Rights Protection (SUAKA) alerted those gathered that in her country the UNHCR was only processing refugees interned in immigration detention, effectively pushing migrants back into these less-than-ideal living situations (RCA 2015). If these terms spread to other South Asian countries, then who stands to benefit?

Journalist Antony Loewenstein (2013) argues that Australia's policies of remote and offshore detention have given rise to an immensely profitable internment industry, in which private contractors have a vested interest in sustaining a worldwide refugee problem. There is some anxiety amongst refugee activists that the privatisation of the processes by which refugees and asylum seekers are re-settled will result in them becoming subject to market conditions, in which their welfare is not the primary concern. Arguably, nations that are not signatories to the UN refugee convention, and therefore not obliged to provide for the welfare of refugees and asylum seekers, would be receptive to having other organisations manage the non-citizens within their borders.

Alex has been granted a 12–18 month release in Thailand during which time the state expects him to be re-settled, however as many working in the system acknowledge the time taken to process claims and applications are unpredictable and elastic. Alex believes his media notoriety has already hampered his passage to seek asylum, exposing him to persecution and violence as a detainee, so he is understandably anxious of being forced back into these conditions. He related to me how a UN official once told him, rather insensitively, that if his re-settlement was not forthcoming, then he might have his refugee status revoked! (Kuhendrarajah 2015) Even if this were not possible, this exchange does not give one confidence in the current system and those administering it.

What this anecdote illustrates are the flaws of the system supposedly designed to assist refugees to be re-settled. As Alex confirms, there is simply no ‘queue’ for refugees, rather there is a range of determining factors, such as one’s age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, where one is fleeing from, specific nations’ refugee intake quotas, a refugee’s application history and ability to negotiate interviews and bureaucratic tasks, to name a few. As many holding countries are not obliged to provide welfare for refugees, these services are often provided by NGOs and charity groups who operate in legal grey zones to address the day-to-day needs of this urban underclass. It is a process that generates rivalry and mistrust amongst refugees and indifference and potential abuse of power amongst its administrators. Without any means of redressing the discrimination they face in holding countries such as Thailand—with no recourse to law and without the means to leave—refugees and asylum seekers are excluded *within* the law, framed as ‘outlaws’ and subject to the unmediated power of the state which could turn intolerant at any given moment.



Figure 6: ‘Mathusan and his mother’

On reflection, we did not set out to make portraits of a people who are emblematic of the contemporary condition. Nor do I believe our intention was to elicit empathy or pity. Rather the exercise was taken up by the Bachelors as a novel opportunity to document and narrate their lives for themselves, and to grant myself and by extension others insight into their existence. In these portraits, those who normally avoid exposure to authority present themselves as faces, families and a community. Appealing to a potential international

audience, the subjects of these portraits leverage some agency as individuals and as a community against the indifference of the state and the intergovernmental resettlement mechanisms to which they appear as statistics.

It might not be unusual, but as one who habitually takes photographs, I avoid being in front of the camera. I cherish and guard my privacy and do not seek to be known or ‘captured’ outside of the fields in which I choose to work and socialise. Similarly, whilst these men seek to be recognised as people with families and histories, due to their ambiguous status they are cautious of being exposed to possible exploitation and further risk. So, I am struck by how many of those who posed for these portraits looked directly down the camera lens, seeking to engage the gaze of the viewer.



Figure 7: ‘Abdulla’

Judith Butler compels her readers to be conscious of the ‘not seeing that is the condition of seeing’ (Butler 2009, p. 120). The subjects of these portraits may never see us themselves, but by meeting the gaze of their photographic representations do we ‘see ourselves seeing’ them (Butler 2009, p. 119)? Are we, perhaps narcissistically, made self-conscious of our own presence in the operations of power that determine whose lives matter? It is one thing to acknowledge one’s privilege, but is one by default of that privilege, complicit with global mechanisms that discriminate? If so, then I—*we*—appeal to you not to be indifferent to these

portraits, to engage with their subjects and to resist the way we habitually consume such images and the social scripts that bind us to political paralysis.

Arguably the ‘fatigue and fatalism’ (Wake 2015, para. 9) with which concerned Australians receive revelations of border violence and policy failure is conditioned by the seemingly unshakeable bipartisan political commitment to tough border policies. Caroline Wake’s creative response to overcoming Australia’s politics of asylum was to pen a ‘Draft Apology to the Survivors of Immigration Detention’ (Wake 2015b) to be delivered by a future Australian Prime Minister ‘at the time of her choosing’. In a gesture that resembles the federal government’s 2008 apology to the ‘stolen generations,’ Wake imagines an Australia in which the camps have all closed and those who have suffered and survived are welcomed to the mainland as citizens. By imagining what this ‘finish line’ might be, Wake challenges her readers ‘plot a path from here to there’ (Wake 2015, para. 9).



Figure 8: ‘Meeting at Om Yai’

Alex is unique in that despite his persecution, marginalisation and immobility he has been able to engage a network of supporters around the world. So whilst these portraits exhibit the conditions in which urban refugees in Bangkok live, they also represent the means, networks and friendships by which these images were made possible. Discursively framing these

portraits in this journal and having them discussed and distributed in the ranks of academia is an invitation to make connections ‘from here to there’—across a vastly differential terrain of privilege and precariousness. It is an attempt to recognise in these Bachelors our own potential plight and the possibility of community against the mechanisms of indifference.

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