

The Clown at the Gates of the Camp: Sovereignty, Resistance, and the Figure of the Fool¹

“Dost thou call me a fool, boy?”

(King Lear, I.iv)

“It’s a good mirror. They’re an army of clowns, we’re an army of clowns. It’s perfect”.

(Member of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, 2007).

Introduction: the clowns at the gate

It is November 2007 at the US-Mexico border in Mexicali/Calexico. The *No Borders Camp* – a self-styled collective of protesters, activists, artists, musicians – is engaged in a week long series of actions directed at the securitization of the border and practices of detention. The activists converge at the gates of a nearby Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility. Among the figures demonstrating at the camp are a group of clowns, members of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA)², their faces painted and wearing red noses, hats and vivid costumes. They confront the detention guards at the fence and dance for the police cameras, playing along the wire mesh, their brightly painted faces gazing through to the other side (see figure 1). “How many keys do you have?”, they call to the camp guards, “Why do you need so many keys? Do you want to be let out?”

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² The Calexico clowns took inspiration from the original UK-based Rebel Clown Army, who describe themselves as ‘reclaiming the art of Rebel Clowning’ and who aim to make ‘clowning dangerous again, to bring it back from the streets’. CIRCA states that ‘with greasepaint we give resistance a funny face’ and that ‘rebellions continue forever’: for the group, it is precisely the clown’s capacity to be ‘approximate and ambivalent, neither here nor there, but in ... the place in between order and chaos’ that gives rebel clowning its power (see www.clownarmy.org). The original UK Rebel Clown troupes used their clowning tactics at anti-corporation and anti-globalisation actions (for instance, the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles) but their ethos has been embraced internationally by other active groups. The No Borders clowns at Calexico evolved from local anti-border vigilante actions, and from the search for a creative and effective way to engage in direct access (Interview with member of CIRCA, November 2007).

Like their 2006 encounters with the vigilante anti-immigration 'Minutemen' group, when the Minutemen called to the police to "get these illegal clowns out of here"³, the Mexicali events position the figure of the clown in close proximity to the sovereign drawing of lines that designate safe from dangerous, legal from illegal, inside from outside. And yet, the clown as political subject cannot be understood as standing outside of power, nor even strictly on the other side of the gates. As has long been recognised in the histories of theatre and dramatic art, the King and the Clown are inescapably conjoined – sovereign power haunted always by the presence of the clown-fool.

To consider the role of the clown in contemporary practices of sovereignty and resistance is to find a way into a twofold problem. First, the spectre of the camp as the nomos of modern sovereign power is widely critiqued for its neglect of the thriving and teeming life that actually accompanies the declaration of exception (Rancière 2004; Negri 2008). The preoccupation with the figure of homo sacer, the very embodiment of Giorgio Agamben's bare life, has obscured the politics of subjects who are not readily made objects of biopower (Agamben 1998). The clown is one such errant and troublesome figure. His presence in the Mexicali/Calexico border camp and at the gates of the detention centre invokes a rich, provocative history in which the clown's foolish wisdom has critiqued the conceits of power.⁴ Yet the clown's significance exceeds his conventional associations with misrule and mockery. Like homo sacer, the clown occupies an ambiguous position between political inclusion and exclusion, between inside and outside. As we shall argue, the sovereign and the clown are bound together in a relationship characterised by antagonism, but also mutual reliance. In short, the sovereign needs the clown.

³ See, for instance, 'The CIRCA Boredom Patrol in Operation WTF (Where's The Fence?)' available on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHL4T1WqIHw>

⁴ The border camps that formed the basis of our primary research are not treated as equivalent to other forms of 'camp' in terms of what takes place there. Agamben is careful not to deduce "the definition of camp from the events that took place there", but rather to ask "what is a camp? what is its political-juridical structure" (2000: 38.7). Thus, the proximity of border camps to the exceptional spaces of borderlands and immigration and detention centres in the US and UK renders them a form of exception to the exception, in which the act of taking outside in order to govern inside (the political-juridical structure) is mirrored by plural acts of resistance that dwell between inside/outside.

As such, the exception within which the clown lives does not represent a complete objectification by a biopower that seeks to govern life itself, nor indeed the apotheosis of sovereignty. Instead, the clown's repetitious invitation to the 'outside' to 'come inside' mirrors the lines drawn by sovereign power, exposing its contingency and fragility.

Second, the comfortable identity references that we turn to for a purchase on the very possibility of politics – social movements, 'counter' or 'anti' everything from globalization to capitalism and war, identifiable and listed groups with names for what they are against – these are also unsettled by the figure of the clown. The clown does not *turn to face* a locus of power as though it could be countered or overturned. Rather he is the example par excellence of the resistance always already present within the exercise of power – standing not inside or outside the gates, but looking through, the clown dwells within the court but is not of its making. In short, the clown troubles the division between interior and exterior on which sovereign political life rests, a division which is also frequently replicated in understandings of resistance.

The camp and the subject of politics

"The essence of the camp", writes Giorgio Agamben, "is the materialization of the state of exception and the consequent creation of a space for naked life as such" (2000: 40.1). In these terms the camp is "the most absolute biopolitical space", where power acts on and through pure biological or species life (Agamben 2000: 40.2). Defined not strictly by reference to the nature of the violent acts conducted within the camp, but rather with regard for how precisely the normal rule of law is suspended so as to give full powers to the force of law, Agamben's chain of 'camps' extends from the "soccer stadium in Bari in which the Italian police temporarily herded Albanian illegal immigrants in 1991", to "the cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities rounded up the Jews" (2000: 42.2). In Agamben's rendering of the Schmittian notion of the camp it becomes possible to recognise the co-presence of sovereign power with biopower – not quite a "cutting off of the King's head" in Foucault's vision of political theory (1991: 121), but nonetheless a sense that

the King's head remains intact only insofar as it can designate and separate naked life from its form of life (Agamben 2000: 10.1).

When a state of emergency is invoked, or in Agamben's reading, a state of exception that increasingly appears "as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics", certain subjects experience the suspension of their political life and the reduction of their existence to the bare life of homo sacer (Agamben 2005: 2). Devoid of value in law, a life whose political worth is suspended with the annulment of the juridical norm, homo sacer cannot be sacrificed and his killing must go unpunished. "The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice", writes Agamben, then "sacred life – life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere" (1998: 83).

As bare life, then, the subject of sovereign power in Agamben's terms experiences a specific drawing of border lines, one that takes outside precisely in order to include within the governable order:

The paradoxical status of the camp as a space of exception must be considered. The camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense of the term 'exception' (*ex-capere*), *taken outside*, included through its own exclusion (Agamben 1998: 170).

The topology of Agamben's camp – perhaps because it maps incorporation by exclusion – has been deployed to imagine the drawing of sovereign lines in spaces from the international border or airport to detention centre and circuits of extraordinary rendition (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Salter 2008; Van Munster 2004; Johns 2005). Yet, the specificity of Agamben's form of sovereignty remains elusive, particularly in relation to the political subjects of the camp and the political potentiality of dissent within the camp. What precisely is the form of sovereign power that emerges in the camp? What forms of subject

and subjectivity are in process of becoming amid this distinctive sovereignty? As Judith Butler suggests, “a contemporary version of sovereignty” is produced in the moment of suspension of the rule of law, within the decision on exception and “at the moment of withdrawal” (2004: 61). This version of sovereignty calls into being a difficult, fractionated and divided subject whose life exceeds the definitive distinction of naked life from form of life (Edkins 2011; Shapiro 2010). Agamben appears to bring a tightly drawn finality to the bareness of the life of the subject in the exception, such that politics, it seems to him “is going through a protracted eclipse” (2000). Yet, the ambiguities and ambivalences of political subjectivity, as William Connolly proposes, are “more littered, layered and complex than Agamben allows” (2005: 137). Significantly for Connolly, the decision on the exception is never quite final, never quite the rule, but only one element in an ongoing movement and oscillation that is never quite contained by sovereign power. The contemporary version of sovereignty, understood in these terms, is a perpetual and contingent playing back and forth between sovereign authorities that “decide the exception” and the plural “cultural forces that insert themselves into the outcome” (2005: 141). Among such plural forces there will be incongruous elements – gatherings of people, objects, things and actions whose associations and relations are uncertain – held together in and through the sovereign exception itself.

It is our contention, and following Jenny Edkins’ (2007) subtle reading of Agamben, that the philosopher himself suggests a way out of the political impasse conjured by his vision of sovereign power. Rendering bare life as “form-of-life”, he imagines a being without definitive identity or claim in the world. This, he describes, is a being “which is only its own bare existence” and which “being its own form remains inseparable from it” and “over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (1998: 188). Like the “whatever being” that Agamben refers to in the *Coming Community*, this is a being that does not make any settled claim for identity or recognition. It is this very lack of identity and lack of definitive demand that constitutes a “threat the State cannot come to terms with” (Agamben 1993: 85). Sovereign power, Agamben reminds us, can recognize and deal with any claim for identity, and yet it

cannot tolerate “that singularities form a community without affirming an identity” (193: 85-6). As Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat suggest, the grammar of sovereign power is not effectively contested by counter identity claims, for such actions merely fight over “where the lines are drawn”(2004: 13). Instead, it is by neither refusing nor accepting the biopolitical distinctions that sovereign power seeks to draw that its logic may be interrupted.⁵ Agamben’s discussions of whatever being and form-of-life point to a space for political action, contestation and resistance that is produced within, and forms an intrinsic part of, sovereign power, one that that is frequently occluded in discussions of homo sacer. Bare life has the potential to become “explicitly and immediately political” (Agamben 1998: 153) – as Edkins has it, bare life is the constitutive outside of sovereignty which may also form “the element that threatens its disruption from within”(2007: 86).

Notwithstanding the important absence of any representable identity in whatever being, questions do remain as to the specific nature of such forms of being. What kinds of subjectivity are problematic for sovereign power, precisely? What kinds of life fail to be comfortably identifiable within the conditions set out by sovereign power? What might the practices and actions of these forms of life of a coming politics look like? The refugee has frequently been invoked as a figure who embodies the threatening ‘outside’ of sovereign political life (Agamben 1995; Edkins and Pin Fat 2004; Nyers 2006; Tyler 2006). Yet, the way in which the ‘bare’ refugee becomes implicated in attempts to oppose sovereign power via rights and humanitarianism frequently replicates sovereign power’s own grasp of bare life. In other words, bare life becomes the object or subject of sovereign power *and* also the object and subject of efforts to oppose it (Agamben 1998: 133, Edkins 2007: 75). As Edkins (2007: 75) puts the problem, “a coming politics, if it is to be other than a sovereign politics, cannot be a form of identity or social movement politics”. Sovereign power cannot be countered by a politics which seeks to draw lines differently, but which still persists in the act of declaring unities and drawing distinctions.

⁵ For further elaboration of the *interruption* of sovereign power see Amoore and Hall (2010).

The clown, we propose, offers an alternative way into thinking about the troubled proximity of sovereign power to its own resistance. The figure of the clown at the border fence embodies something of the plural forces that William Connolly envisages inserting themselves into the outcome of the exception. The identity claims that are made by many social movements – seeking to give an account of “for whom we speak” or “for what political objective we act” – are not present in the case of the clowns. Rather, in their gestures, their playfulness and provocations, they occupy the very contingency of the outcome itself. In the presence of the clowns we find the capacity to “make strange” (Foucault 1988) and remove the certainty of what we think we know: this security measure, this border patrol, indeed this protest, may not be quite what we imagined it to be.

It is precisely the singularity of the clown’s presence that, as in Agamben’s sense of a coming community, affords the “trickster” or “assistant” the capacity to be an “exemplar”, “to appropriate belonging itself” (2007: 10.1). In the shape-shifters and tricksters of folkloric tales and children’s stories, Agamben finds singularity at work. As exemplars, or “beispiel” – example as it is in German (*bei-spiel*, to play alongside) – such figures play alongside the narrative itself. Their singularity resides precisely in their capacity to move between the universal and the particular, without ever settling. We use examples to signal something of the world, if not the universal then something in common or a being together. But the way that the example plays is by speaking also of a finite and granular scale of uniqueness, a specificity to this instance and this instance alone. In this sense the singular occupies the space in-between the wider set, a broader phenomenon, and the specificity of the unique circumstances it describes. The clown plays alongside sovereign power as the figure of the *beispiel* or example that moves ceaselessly across the border line, oscillating back and forth. It is not the case that our encounters with the CIRCA clowns yield definitive *examples of resistances*, but that as *beispiele* they exemplify the fractionated and incomplete nature of all political subjectivity.

For Gilles Deleuze it is this singular being that is the embodiment of an immanent life, a life of singularities and potentialities, that are “merely actualized in subjects and objects” (2001: 29). The characteristics of small children, as Deleuze has it, exemplify this pure singularity, “all resemble one another and have hardly any individuality, but they have singularities: a smile, a gesture, a funny face – not subjective qualities” (2001: 30). Like Agamben’s trickster exemplars, Deleuze’s figurative children play alongside, dwelling between a common resemblance or belonging and a unique gestural life. In the illustrations philosophers have given of figures of immanence – from Deleuze’s use of Melville’s *Bartleby*, to Agamben’s assistants – the distance from a discernible politics seems to be great. Yet, in the spirit of those who search for such figures, we propose that the clowns at the gates of the camp similarly resemble one another, while having smiles and gestures in play that are pure singularities. The Mexicali clowns - like the rabble-rousing minstrels of the 2007 No Borders Camp at Gatwick airport, UK (see figure 2) and the playful clowns at the Toronto G20 protests⁶ - embody this singularity. The political capacity of the clown, then, lies not in an act that is accomplished or achieved once and for all – to end border controls, or to stop war, or to resist globalization, for example – but lies instead in a series of oscillating exemplars that gather together otherwise scattered subjects and objects. The political capacity lies not in the actualization of an end goal, then, but in potentiality itself. As Connolly succinctly puts it, “there is more to reality than actuality” (2011: 43). How might we understand the figure of the clown as just such an exemplar of life’s potential, standing as he does in fraught relation to sovereign power?

The sovereign and the fool

[S]o basically, every time we do an action, we will sit down with our group and come up with our, like, clown logic... Of what are we going

⁶ See ‘G20 Toronto Protests: Send in the Clowns’, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY3lxnfrEnw>

to do, why are a bunch of clowns going to go to this particular space? [O]ur whole idea of direct action clowning is we don't want to, like, go to a march and make it more fun. Or we don't want to do street theatre... but what we want to do is like pick a target to disrupt and then go there and like clowning around (Member of CIRCA, 2007)⁷

For members of CIRCA - reflecting on the encounter at the detention camp in November 2007 and the ongoing confrontations with the Minutemen - the disruptive power of clowning lies in its capacity to distract and confuse. At the detention camp, the authoritative surveillant eye of the police and camp guards was drawn towards the outlandish, comedic antics of the clowns, whose tricks acted to simultaneously provoke and de-escalate: as one member described it, "they're happy to video tape us instead of videotaping everybody else". In the confrontations with the Minutemen, CIRCA members argue that they are trying to break out of the normal (what they see as violent, masculinist) power dynamics which characterise these groups: clowning being a way to "ridicule them, demoralise them". The clowning interventions of CIRCA use laughter or absurdity as a way of subverting the expected, of introducing ridicule, mockery and chaos where there is usually authority and order. Clowns, as the UK-based CIRCA group argue, "embody life's contradictions, they are both fearsome and innocent, wise and stupid, entertainers and dissenters, healers and laughing stocks, scapegoats and subversives."⁸

The themes of subversion and mockery are found throughout the long and knotted cultural history of the fool, the clown and the trickster in literature, myth and drama. It is not the case that these transcultural figures are interchangeable, or merge into a single 'type', but historian of the fool Enid Welsford (1935) makes the case for a genealogy that traces their common, overlapping and conjoined roots. From the professional buffoons of the ancient Hellenic courts, through to medieval court jesters, from carnivalesque

⁷ Interview with member of CIRCA, November 2007.

⁸ See www.clownarmy.org

fools to mythical tricksters and the theatrical clown, the clown-fool has always occupied an ambiguous and troublesome social and political position, embodying incongruity, disorder and chaos. The fool's liminality – a subject who is neither 'here nor there' but 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969) – has conferred on him a transgressive and ambivalent status. As Grottanelli (1983: 120) notes, the clown is a "lowly, comical breaker of rules" who is also frequently considered "important and sacred".

The significance of the clown or fool for the study of resistance has traditionally resided within his association in culture and history with chaos, inversion and misrule. The fool as a "jovial ring-leader" and "mischief-maker" (Welsford 1935: 197) creates an inverted and upturned world. We see this clearly in the long-running association of foolery with carnival. For example, in the heyday of misrule - the medieval Feast of Fools – the religious ceremonies of the cathedrals and churches were parodied by improper, bawdy and grotesque merriment (Bakhtin 1968: 74). The fool became king, the normal order of things was reversed and 'clownish bishops' were elected. These outbreaks of chaos themselves invoked the unruly anarchy of ancient Roman pagan saturnalia, where "laws lost their force, and a mock-king ruled over a topsy-turvy world" (Welsford 1935: 199). The carnival casts the high and the apparently unshakeable into a base "bodily lower stratum" for rebirth: the "element of relativity and of becoming was emphasised, in opposition to the immovable and the extratemporal stability of the medieval hierarchy" (Bakhtin 1968: 81-2). Bakhtin saw the carnival to be "victory of laughter over fear" which can give a "new outlook on life" (1968: 90-91).

Carnival, then as now, allows "certain things to be said, certain forms of social power to be exercised that are muted or suppressed outside this social sphere" (Scott 1990: 173). The ridicule of the carnival – where kings are brought low, where laughter rules, where men become women, and women become men, and where the sacred is mocked - inserts uncertainty and abandon in place of order and hierarchy. Understood as a form of resistance and critique, the carnivalesque is linked to subversion and the formation of alternative political imaginaries, to the notion of resistance as rebellion, and to

the production of “another world” (see Nield 2006). Lachmann, for example, argues that Bakhtin’s view of the carnivalesque “sees the anticipation of another, utopian world” in which “questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway” (cited in Bleiker 2000: 204-5) The political significance of laughter undermines the discourses of rationality and coherence underpinning political and economic processes (see de Goede 2005). The carnival has frequently been accused of being a “superficial and helpless gesture in the face of power” or a diversionary and institutionalised “safety valve” (cf. de Goede 2005: 389), its apparent subversive intent frequently entrenching existing status quos (see Bleiker 2000: 205). Nevertheless, the way the carnivalesque questions that which is normally unchallenged means that it continues to materialise a political tension despite its apparent contemporary institutionalisation (see Jackson 1990; Scott 1990).

The chaotic abandon of the carnival is tightly bound with the history of the clown-fool. The fool harnesses and embodies the licence and privilege of the carnivalesque, with which he has traditionally been associated. Indeed, his presence is intrinsic to the materialisation of the carnivalesque and its licentious ridicule of authority – as CIRCA put it, the clown can ‘survive anything and get away with anything’. The fool can “create an imaginative breathing space in which the normal categories of order and hierarchy seem less than completely inevitable” (Scott 1990: 168). Important for our argument here, though, is the argument that the clown-fool is not simply associated with the temporary eruption of carnivalesque misrule. Rather, the clown has been a consistent presence within sovereign courts from earliest history. Whether in the form of ‘natural idiots’, professional buffoons or deformed mascots of ancient courts, or the famous court fools or fool societies of the Middle Ages, or even the archetypal Elizabethan jesters, the fool enjoys a distinct place in the sovereign court. As a witty performer, ridiculous joker or half-witted madman, the fool skirts the line between ridicule, flattery and criticism. He is tolerated, celebrated and deplored. The figure of the “sage fool” is a particularly prevalent motif in cultural history (Welsford 1935: 218-236) - not simply a figure of fun, but a lowly subject able to use his wits to outdo his

'superiors', and speak truth with impunity, exposing the ridiculousness of those around him. The folly of the clown becomes "a mask for the wise and an armour for the critic" as well as a technique for revealing the "folly of the wise" (Welsford 1935: 216).

The fool's wisdom is related to his special capacities, capacities that we suggest are akin to the singularities and potentialities Deleuze and Agamben outline. Foremost among these capacities is the deployment of a childlike naivety which questions that which is usually unquestioned. Whether it is the Mexicali clowns crying 'why do you have so many keys?' to the ICE detention guards, or the Gatwick No Borders protestors singing merrily about police surveillance and plump officers, the fool imitates the genuine mental deficiencies of natural 'idiot-fools', deploying illogical playfulness and curiosity about the world as a critical artifice (Welsford 1935: Mitchell 1992). Idiocy produces an asocial and amoral character that is 'outside' normal laws and duties, so depriving the fool of "rights and responsibilities and put[ting] him in the paradoxical position of virtual outlawry combined with utter dependence" (Willeford 1969: 13). The natural fool as a negative and capricious reflection of humanity, a "troublesomely alive inversion", is central to the cultural construction of folly, argues Mitchell (1992: 17). The fool's mental deficiency (feigned or otherwise) has historically blurred into full madness, which might be represented as a curse or a blessing, but which is potentially transformative. Welsford, for example, notes that the genealogies of the fool from Ireland to the Islamic world often indicate clairvoyant magical abilities associated with insanity either demonically or divinely given (1935: chapter IV, Willeford 1969: 25).

It is not merely the case that the carnivalesque confuses and inverts sovereign power, then, but that, abstracted from law, rights and responsibility, the clown-fool embodies a different line of sight. The fool's idiocy and madness confers clearness or expansion of vision: the fool can expose what others cannot or choose not to see. The fool deploys this clear, lateral vision as an unintentional or intentional critical ruse. By "breaking or challenging frames of sensible conduct and thought", the clown points baldly to the

“prickly issues” of everyday life (Mitchell 1992: 19). We can see this interruption of the scopic regimes of incarceration, for example, when the CIRCA clowns repeatedly asked the guards at the ICE detention facility about their keys, enquiring solicitously whether they wanted to be let out or whether they needed help to escape. We see this also in their apparently illogical misunderstanding of the Minutemen protests, claiming to be providing security for their demonstration.

The fool’s madness and wisdom are simultaneously lauded and deplored by sovereign powers. Indeed, the relationship between the sovereign and the fool is symbiotic yet antagonistic. Shakespeare’s fools epitomise the tradition of the ‘sage fool’, and the troublesome relationship with the sovereign. King Lear’s Fool, for example, is destined to see and speak the truth as Lear descends into madness. The Fool acts as a counterpoint and touchstone to the follies and vanities of those around him, and his wisdom and insight is proved greater than his ‘superiors’. Welsford (1935: 73) characterises the festival-fool as a “curiously unattached figure” who “stands outside the performance” of ritual as a bringer of luck and fortune. This ‘unattachment’ resonates with Lear’s Fool, who is part of the action, yet estranged from it. His words become a commentary on the events unfolding around him, not only in the sense of providing explanatory observations to the audience, but in the sense of seeing the unfolding tragedy clearly in a way that the king embroiled in it does not. As Lear is stripped of his title and authority, abandoned by his family and descending into insanity, the Fool becomes a lone voice of reason and conscience. Their roles are reversed: the king becomes a fool, and the Fool becomes king, telling Lear ‘Thou wouldst make a good fool’. As they wander the heath in the storm, Lear and his Fool experience the persistent trope of reliance, reversal and substitution that characterises the history of the fool and the sovereign.

What kind of relation is it that holds the sovereign together with the fool? What gives the fool the ability to speak uncomfortable truths to sovereign power? Certainly the fool does not enjoy a position of utter impunity. Just as Lear’s Fool meets an indeterminate and uncertain end – most likely hanged – so real

jesters and court clowns frequently found their unimpeachable position revoked: they could be punished, banished, whipped and fall from favour. For Willeford (1969), however, the fool is ultimately indispensable to sovereign power, and inseparable from it. Ancient kingly power, he argues, was closely associated with sacred forces through which nature and the cosmos could be controlled, and the sovereign political space and its boundaries secured. The liminal fool embodied something of the threatening 'outside' from which the sovereign power derived. The king was human and fallible, but also divine, a mediator between the ordered, law-bound kingdom over which he ruled, and the chaos beyond. Willeford (1969: 154) suggests that the figure of the fool is the subject who points to the ambiguities of kingly office. More specifically, the fool (in his madness, or clairvoyance, or idiocy) touches the scattered sources of sacred power which bolstered sovereign power, but which threatened to overwhelm it. The fool, in combining the "too little" of idiocy with the "too much" of madness' (Willeford 1969: 26), comes to occupy an ambiguous position that is at once celebrated and feared. The fool's position means that he has acted historically as a decoy or scapegoat" for sovereign power. Early fool mascots were kept for luck and could draw ill fortune from superiors. The fool in this sense performed a vital duty, but he could also be been banished, excommunicated or even slain as a substitute for the king, ritually or literally (Welsford 1935: 66, 68-9, 74).

In sum, a consideration of the history of the clown-fool, suggests that he occupies an uneasy and frequently dangerous position in relation to sovereign power. The fool is invited in, tolerated, even lauded. He occupies a privileged, protected position and the licence that he enjoys allows him to speak and act in a way that no-one else can. He is outside the norms and laws which govern those around him, but he is also dependent and vulnerable to the whims of the sovereign. His association with a disordered 'outside' (madness, chaos, nature) threatens the king, but his expanded line of sight makes him necessary – he may act as a scapegoat, a lucky mascot or ritual substitute. The fool, then, like Agamben's topology of the exception, "being-outside, and yet belonging", expresses something of the indistinction between inside and outside that plagues, but is necessary for, the exercise of sovereign power. In

this specific sense sovereign power requires the slippery figure of the fool who embodies the blurred distinction between inside and outside, and who speaks from a place and with a voice that is otherwise unavailable to the king.

Clowning and forms-of-life

The cultural genealogy of the fool has profound ramifications for a consideration of the clown at the gates of the camp and resistance to sovereign power. *First*, we propose, the traditional notions of foolery as a (temporary, even licensed) chaos that reverses or ‘upturns’ modes of power does not fully capture the power of the clown to ‘make strange’. ‘Making strange’ is the process of denaturalising political practices that appear inevitable or natural (see de Goede 2005: 381). As a form of critique, ‘making strange’ unsettles what is usually certain, ordered and inevitable. As Foucault (1988) writes, “a critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged modes of thought the practices we accept rest”. In the context of the border, the exercise of sovereign power relies on the routine enunciation of multiple distinctions – between legal and illegal, between secure and insecure, between authorised and unauthorised. The invisibility of these designations is intrinsic to their mode of governing, and becomes part of a distinctive scopic regime of security (Amoore 2007; Amoore and Hall 2010). At the US/Mexican border, for example, this invisibility is two-fold: the embedding of detention centres within suburban malls literally hides their materiality, making the exceptionality of the camp part of a mundane urban landscape. The border also becomes part of the everyday routine of life in the region – lining up to cross to see family, presenting documents to officials, submitting to questioning – and becomes unnoticed, familiar, normal. In the UK, similarly, the No Borders camp at Gatwick was concerned with visually excavating the innocuous-looking detention facility from the sprawling industrial warehouses of the airport periphery. As Jonathan Crary (1990) notes, much of what enters our field of vision, what we encounter, feel, touch and hear, threatens to fall away: attention and distraction are conjoined within visual practices. Attention and

distraction are both at work at the sovereign border – ordering what can be seen and what must remain hidden. Consumers at the mall barely notice the razor wired perimeter fence of the neighbouring ICE detention facility, tourists crossing to Mexico for the day barely notice the people who cross several times a day to work and conduct family life, commuters barely notice the illegal migrants gathering outside DIY depots to be picked up for work.

The clown, as we have seen, brings an expanded or enhanced vision to what is normally accepted, ignored or settled. As the clowns circled the ICE detention facility in a noisy dance with other No Border campers, temporarily claiming the highway outside the facility for a twenty minute ‘dance party’, the road, mall and facility itself took on a different aspect (see figure 3). As the comfortable journeys of shoppers, diners and commuters were interrupted, passers-by looked on with consternation. The clowns, picking at the detention fence, calling through the gate, creeping along the floor and cavorting in front of the guards asking innocently how they could help the guards escape were met with blank confusion. The political significance of estrangement lies in the way it interrupts and unsettles the familiar and ordinary to make people notice what was previously taken for granted. As we have argued elsewhere and in relation to installation art, the interruption has political significance because it is unsettling, it acts without full actualisation in subjects and objects (see Amoores and Hall 2010). William Connolly similarly signals the “interruption of smooth narratives” that he locates in the “jumps in experience” of film and theatre (2011: 62). As members of CIRCA note, clowning interventions act precisely with such jumps in everyday experience, there being no single “right interpretation” for the action because “it’s already slippery”, as one member put it.

Significantly, detention guards and police responded to the uproar by recording the clownish antics via mobile phones and video cameras, recalling the Minutemen’s angry cries to the police to “get these illegal clowns out of here”: “they don’t belong here... get them out of here... get on the other side”. These responses were an effort to reinstate clear lines between legal and illegal, order and disorder. The claim to represent proper citizenship within a

governable order, a claim which is central to the Minutemen's vigilanteism for example, rests on the designation of some who 'don't belong': illegal migrants, 'unpatriotic' citizens, laughing clowns. The cry that the clowns 'don't belong' or that their place is 'on the other side' seeks to place the clown in an identifiable position. The clown as form-of-life, however, always already does not belong, is already outside the law, thereby eluding efforts to locate him comfortably within the visual economy of the border, or within a terrain where lawful and unlawful, belonging and anomaly could be clearly distinguished.

Here we would also draw a distinction between clowning as mockery, and clowning as a form of 'making strange', while noting the interrelationship between the two. Foucault noted that traditions which show the powerful to be ludicrous (like clowning, or ritual carnivalesque) are not sufficient for "limiting its effects" and "magically dethroning the person to whom one gives the crown" (1999: 13). Instead, showing the powerful to be ridiculous is "a way of giving a striking form of expression to the unavoidability, the inevitability of power, which can function in its full rigor and at the extreme point of its rationality even when in the hands of someone who is effectively discredited" (1999: 13). Moreover, the clown's ravaging of the status quo is regarded as 'momentary', his influence unequal to that of the king, and his critical capacities sometimes simply shoring up established norms and values (Mitchell 1992: 19-20).

However, the clown's inability to topple the king, or create an alternative world does not strictly diminish the importance of laughter and foolery within the "manifold discursive practices that [...] create space for alternative imaginations" (de Goede 2005: 381: see also Bleiker 2000). The history of the fool and the sovereign demonstrates that a "grand eschatological move of overcoming" is unfeasible (Edkins 2007: 87). The clown as form-of-life does not exhibit locatable identity, nor rally to a clearly-defined issue, nor call for a specific response, nor make his intentions explicit. He shatters what is normally certain, making it appear fraught and difficult. It is precisely this revelation or exposure which underpins political critique as Foucault describes it: uncovering intractability and removing the settled and definite grounds for

judgement. For philosopher Thomas Keenan (1997), such a removal of grounds is essential to political life. “Politics is difficult. It is difficulty itself”, he writes, such that “the only responsibility worthy of the name comes with the withdrawal of the rules or the knowledge on which we might rely to make our decisions for us”. This then, is the capacity of the clown to ‘make strange’ – to remove what we thought was certain, and to reveal the difficulty that is political life.

Second, the clown evades complete capture within the lines dividing inside from outside, lines on which sovereign power relies. The separation of interior and exterior is absolutely fundamental to accounts of the production of a governable political order and the operation of the sovereign border (Walker 1993). Yet sovereignty relies precisely on the ambiguity of the lines separating inside and outside, even as its operation seeks to clearly define them. After Agamben, sovereign power rests on the capacity to “take outside”, to include within the governable order by means of exclusion. The distinction between politically qualified life and life made bare is fundamental to Agamben’s account, as is the relationship of banishment and the form of personhood which is produced by the ban. Agamben summons the ancient term *sacer* to understand the way in which a condemned and banished life may be ‘sacred’ as it may be extinguished yet not sacrificed (see Grotanelli 1983: 134). Homo *sacer* assumes a banned existence and “is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right”, yet remains “in a continuous relationship with power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death” (Agamben 1998: 183). Crucially, the condition of homo *sacer* haunts all species life – anyone, any life may become a subject from whom law is withdrawn – if it is deemed expedient or necessary within the sovereign decision on the exception.

As DeCaroli (2007: 47) argues, banishment (and sovereignty) rests on an outside – real, virtual, divine – where one can be banished. The contemporary camps, detention centres and border holding zones, like the one in Calxico, or Gatwick, are the spatial inscription of this ‘inside/outside’. Yet the indistinction between law and violence, inclusion and exclusion in the camp is

mirrored in the other reading of banishment that the clown and fool provide. Cultural history shows the fool periodically becoming *homo sacer* - banished, scapegoated, exiled - but his inhabitation of the zone of indistinction does not reduce him to abject, power-less bare life. Having touched the 'outside', he gains a unique traction and may return to sovereign circles, as a figure of luck or awe. Banishment does not herald a complete biopolitical fracture, but a potential transformation. Indeed, ancient fables see the trickster fool condemned and banished for a criminal infraction, yet transmuting into a hero champion, invigorated by his outlaw status (see Grottanelli 1983). Grottanelli (1983: 136-7) argues that *homo sacer* and the trickster fool are lowly and impure, but also important and sacred, a paradoxical status that comes from embodying the liminality and impurity of barriers.

The crisis that the clown provokes rests on the way he or she troubles the topography of inside and outside on which sovereign distinctions rely. The fool-clown is not able to be taken outside in order to include as sovereign logic demands. He is of the outside already, and he folds what sovereign power seeks to make separate (outside and inside, law and outlaw, inclusion and exile) constantly inwards. The position of the clown is akin to Didier Bigo's (2001) invocation of the Möbius strip in the context of the international securitised border, where the border between the inside and outside "is contingent rather than fixed", and where "one never knows on which face one is located". An alternative vision of political subjectivity within the sovereign ban, then, is one that holds together the vulnerability and exposure of *homo sacer* with the errant and troublesome fool, who embodies the aporia that plague sovereign power.

CIRCA describes itself as an army of Fools who have "thrown away their sceptres and broken the chains that shackled them to the throne", giving the clown an insolent, dangerous and disobedient capacity to challenge and provoke. In this claim, CIRCA invoke the idea of resistance or contestation necessarily breaking free or standing outside or 'apart' in order to face, oppose or defy the locus of power. Our point, though, is precisely that it is the very proximity of the clown to the king (and the concomitant proximity of

relations of resistance to relations of power) that haunts the sovereign decisions taking place in what Connolly calls the “shadow zone” of contemporary security (2011: 135). It is important to note that the shackles which bind the fool and the sovereign together are onerous not only for the fool, and can never be entirely broken. The fool’s madness, his licence, his insanity, or literal exile means that he is beyond capture within the “tight logic” that Agamben proposes for sovereign power. It is the fool’s very inseparability from sovereign power that is most provocative, rather than his ability to set himself apart. The ban produces a situation where “it is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order” (Agamben 1998: 28). To be an ‘outlaw’ is to make it impossible to be completely ‘without the law’ in sense of *homo sacer*. An outlaw that is produced by sovereign power may also be an “existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (Agamben 1998: 153). The fool figure is not comfortably encompassed within the divisions or lines set out by sovereign power, nor by the demands for identity and cause of social movements. The clown is always outside himself, a divided and fractionated subject whose political subjectivity is layered and disordered long in advance of bio-politics.

The reading we have given of the clown-fool points to a form of politics that is always already proximate to the lines and distinctions which form part of sovereign power’s logic. What is evident from the clown-fool’s history is that resistance to the “paradoxical logic of sovereignty” is not that which transcends, or overcomes, but that which destabilises via an acknowledgement that life (and sovereign distinctions) are “more messy, layered, and complex than any logical analysis can capture” (Connolly 2004: 29). The finality of the biopolitical fractures that Agamben discusses, those between political and bare life, are not complete at all.

The clown, then, embodies “life’s contradictions”, as CIRCA put it, embodying an errant subjectivity that evades and exceeds the governing of species life. The clown does not demand to be recognised, or have a definable claim acknowledged, or seek to draw different authoritative lines to those of sovereign power. The way in which the clown “calls the bluff” of sovereign

power (Edkins 2007) is by exhibiting a life that is indefinite, a singular existence. It is a form of life that is attuned to emergent worlds, worlds of becoming that William Connolly writes, invite “experimental intervention in a world that exceeds human powers of attunement, explanation, prediction, mastery, or control” (2011: 10). The clowns exhibit just such a spirit of experimental intervention, with no end game in sight, no desire to wrest mastery and control from the sovereign, no ambition to explain the present or predict the future. As exemplars of indefinite life that does not make recognizably sovereign claims (as ‘citizen’ or ‘civil society’ or ‘social movement’), the potentiality of the clown signals a novel political capacity. Clowns are characters who exhibit and perform the fractionated and unknowable, undecidable life of *all political subjects*. Their playing alongside sovereign power acts through gestures, styles and forms that defy a unified identity claim or body politic. Moving restlessly between the echoes of apparent universals (human rights, humane treatment, collective voices and claims) and the particular and finite gestures of this ICE facility, that shopping mall, this fence, the clowns embody singularity itself. Their associations –with each other, with the border guards, with state and sovereign, with the fence and the mall – are less akin to a right to free association, and more like an associative life of agile connections, lively gatherings, modulated action, and indefinite claims.

Conclusions: the teeming life of the camp

A few days after the detention facility encounter near Calexico, the CIRCA clowns were found once more at the San Ysidro crossing into Mexico. With whistles, police costumes, and a large sign depicting an arrow and the slogan ‘One Way’, the clowns swarmed a group of academics, artists and activists who were being given a walking tour of the border. As people crossed the turnstile into Mexico the clowns drew amused and confused glances (see figures 4, 5). Reflecting on the event in the days that followed, one CIRCA member explained:

Well they [the group] were going on a tour to see the, the contradictions of the border... But we wanted to highlight their contradictions, like as a group, which is like definitely part of the contradictions of the border. Like academics, like privileged people touring the border [...] turning it into this something that is in itself a contradiction...

The target for this clowning action was a group of participants in the border tour who had used World Bank funding to build access stairways in Caracas slums. The clown's desire had been to reveal what she saw as the absurdity and hypocrisy of this enterprise – of using World Bank funds to make it easier for slum dwellers to get to the “city where they can work for poverty wages”. A fellow clown disagreed: although accepting funds from the World Bank for a scheme such as this was “outrageous”, the idea of serving the community via architectural improvements was sound.

It is this difficulty, the political impossibility of a definite target, established grounds, a defined aim, that is an element held across not only the actions of the clowns but also all forms and modalities of resistance politics. To confront or to turn to face sovereign power is never fully realisable. The participants in the Calxico No Border camp recognise that their gathering is held together across uncertainties, that the camp is “a difficult space to be in”. In this sense, the clown as a form-of-life that exceeds identity formation is a metaphor for all forms of resistance and dissent that shatter the social movements' demand for a being together based on a definitive 'we', a definitive foe, a clear end goal. As Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek have written:

Social movements often rely on identity claims, but identity itself is never fully constituted [...] It does not follow that the failure of identity to achieve complete determination undermines the social movements at issue; on the contrary, that incompleteness is essential (Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000: 2).

The incompleteness is essential – and so the manifest absence of a settled out position on the border camp or actions at the border does not negate the

capacity for resistance. On the contrary, incompleteness, uncertainty, and indeterminacy are the condition of possibility for the making of political claims. “We might insist”, writes Butler, “that universality is an emergence, or a non-place” (2000: 37). In the actions of clowning we find precisely the absence of an identity claim, a dwelling within singularities, and a gathering of emergent elements that are chaotic, absurd, confusing and bawdy. The clowns at the gates show that the camp is teeming and thriving with life: whistles, facepaint, flags, guitars, video cameras, tents, water bottles, horns. Their objects and antics are met with confusion, laughter, and the call that they “have no place here”, no place in law, no place on the visible landscape of qualified civic and political life.

Yet, as we have shown in our reading of the genealogy of the clown-fool, to be outside of the law, an outlaw, to have no place, places the clown in curious proximity to the king. Sovereignty is an extraordinarily agile and adaptive practice and, in its contemporary form it acts ever more voraciously on the affective, sentient and corporeal worlds of life itself. As the CIRCA clowns with whom we opened this paper insist, “They’re an army of clowns, we’re an army of clowns, it’s perfect”. Not only do the clowns revel in the gaps and interstices of resistance politics, dwelling affirmatively in a world of singularities, but they haunt sovereignty’s paradox, taking on the mantle of the outside that is invited inside the court. The clown at the gates of the camp is a peculiar but fierce advocate of the life that teems within – he is a reminder of the excess, of that which will always slip away from the capacity to draw the line. Even where the border camp threatens to be gathered up within the assemblage of security itself, the clowns display, as Connolly writes, “a vitality or excessiveness that is not entirely governed by the assemblage” (2011: 25). Where sovereign power is founded on the capacity to separate naked life from its form – as identifiable categories of ‘worker’, ‘woman’, ‘activist’ and so on (Agamben 2000: 10.1), the clown is not reducible to a category, not separable in form from naked life as such. Seen through the eyes of the clown, the camp is not a bare political space but is lively, liveable, teeming with life and conviviality, a space where Agamben’s nomos of modern politics meets the coming community.

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Figures

Figure 1 – Clowns at the gates of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centre, Mexicali/Calexico.



Figure 2 – The ‘trickster’ at the 2007 No Borders Camp, near Gatwick.



Figure 3 – Clowning as interruption – the ‘dance party’ at the Calexico detention facility.



Figures 4, 5 – clowns at the San Ysidro crossing US/Mexican border.

