Suffering and its Depiction through Visual Culture
How Refugees are Turned into Enemies and Figures of Hatred: The Australian Case

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Introduction

The resurgence of neo-nationalist or, indeed, turbo-nationalist sentiment, rhetoric, and policies is evident in many parts of the world, often manifest as apparent reactions to the arrival or presence of refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents the number of refugees and displaced persons at 68.5 million in early 2019 – a number unprecedented since the end of the Second World War (see https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html). This essay is interested in the manifestations of bordering practices targeting the most vulnerable migrants and border crossers, refugees, and asylum seekers. Bordering practices incorporate spatial, territorial, imaginative, psychological, affective, and political components (Mezzedra and Nielsen, 2013). Despite the multifarious, heterodox manifestations of 'border' in the contemporary world, as has been noted by many researchers, when it comes to the most needy and vulnerable migrants, nation-states' reactions to attempted border crossings or arrivals by refugees and asylum seekers reflect the adoption of a war footing, with rhetoric and interventions premised on the state facing an invasion. This war-like approach is used by states to justify giving themselves licence to remove, incarcerate, and punish refugees for their mode of arrival and for simply being present – as is the case, I argue, across the EU, North America, and Australia. This development is of great concern not only with respect to the rights of refugees, but also for the societies that wreak havoc through the adoption of such policies and arrangements.

Many states have responded to refugee flows with policies and practices that deter, detain, and deport asylum seekers, refugees, and other persons labelled 'irregular migrants', justifying this punitive response with rhetorical and emotive assertions of fear and danger. This essay explores artistic, visual, and filmic interventions by asylum seekers, refugees, and others who take exception to state prac-

tices. These interventions seek to document and recount refugees' own stories, to give voice to those who would otherwise be silenced through their entanglement with contemporary politicized processes in which nation-states are de-territorialized and re-territorialized, making and unmaking the idea of 'sovereign spaces' as territories for certain authorized members through the exclusion of others.

The focus here is on asylum seekers and refugees responding to the violence in the 'sovereign spaces' of detention centres. These spaces have been created specifically as part of Australia's practice of 'off-shore' detention and the processing of asylum seekers on the Pacific island nation of Nauru and on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. This examination of these responses will begin with a brief consideration of the creation of these spaces as 'spaces of disappearance' (Tazreiter, 2018) before turning to several key artistic and narrative interventions that tell stories very different from the dominant governmental rhetoric.

The visual and artistic work considered here, which narrates and documents asylum seekers and refugees who are subject to state 'capture' and subsequently to a type of 'disappearance', lends itself to an analysis of a politics of resistance as well as one of reimagining the world. On the one hand, the politics of protest, resistance, or dissent is understood as a politics focused on the state, with advocating changes to state policy being the key driver (Tazreiter, 2010; Rosenberger, 2018). In this essay the focus will not be on policy change and advocacy for 'reform' in this traditional sense. It is instead social change or transformation that is of interest here, particularly that which comes about through the affective impact of visual cultures, particularly in their artistic, filmic, and photographic forms. The affective realm is felt through the body and also expressed through emotions (Tazreiter, 2015). This essay asks what impact affective visual forms of communication have on diverse publics' understanding of the circumstances faced by refugees.

The next section will evaluate the concept of outsider alongside contemporary refugee status. This is followed by a discussion of the context in which refugees arrive and are received in Australia. With this conceptual and contextual overview in place, chosen case studies of intervention, advocacy, and the sharing of the refugee voice through visual cultures are examined.

The contemporary refugee and outsider status

Borders have territorial as well as temporal and metaphysical manifestations. The physical territory encapsulating a nation-state as a sovereign space is easily visualized in the concrete, physical manifestation of walls, fences, border guards, and detention centres that dominate in the twenty-first century. However, the nation-state border and its historical legacy of defining members and limiting access to non-members through citizenship also generates psychological barriers manifest

in social attitudes to those seeking to cross national borders, such as asylum seek-ers, refugees, and other 'irregular migrants'. In a different manner, the Mediter-ranean Sea forms a barrier to irregular migrants seeking to enter Europe through the sea corridor from North Africa, notably Libya. In Australia, irregular migrant arrivals – asylum seekers – face a new kind of 'border of disappearance' whereby the legal excision of Australian territory and off-shore removals have resulted in a hybridized form of border (Tazreiter, 2018). Asylum seekers wanting to invoke Aus-tralia's protection obligations under the Refugee Convention are sent to the small island nation of Nauru or to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, where they are de-tained while their claims are assessed. This policy continues amid an information blackout ordered by the Department of Home Affairs that prevents Australian me-dia from receiving information about attempted boat arrivals and 'push backs'. In early May 2019 a boat of Sri Lankan asylum seekers landed on Christmas Island but were forcibly returned to Sri Lanka. The news was only released to the Australian public in early June after the federal election held on May 18.[1] As will be discussed in more detail below, Australia's approach to refugees and asylum seekers has some unique and perhaps remarkable characteristics, but it also fits a pattern across the affluent parts of the world in which new borders and boundaries are created with respect to migrants and particularly to the most vulnerable among them. These borders are of the psyche and imagination as much as they are tangible borders on land crossings or at air and sea ports.

The 'border of disappearance' is a construction of the Australian state that is unique in that it renders refugees and asylum seekers physically 'removed' from the Australian mainland, where they seek to lodge a protection application, and psy-chologically disappeared to the general population of Australia through the rhetor-ical and legal shields of media and information blackouts and the long-standing demonization of asylum seekers and refugees (Tazreiter, 2017). Despite this dou-ble disappearance, the stories, voices, and faces of the detained make themselves heard and visible – even to those who are most vocal in wanting refugees to dis-appear. The concept of haunting introduced by Avery Gordon is apt in this context (2008). Gordon uses the language of haunting to convey an experiential modality to assist in understanding organized force, abusive systems, and their impacts on everyday life – impacts felt not only by the oppressed, but by wider society and the bystander. The themes of disappearance and haunting re-emerge later in this essay in the context of visual interventions by Behrouz Boochani, a refugee detained on Manus Island, and his collaborators.

In migration studies, the border relates to the gate-keeping role of the state, yet the concept simultaneously does the cultural work of sifting and sorting af-

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1   https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-30/asylum-seekers-sent-back-to-sri-lanka-from-christmas-island/11163526

filiations, loyalties, and social ties built across generations and often in defiance of the geographically fixed spatiality of the nation-state. Properly seen, the border is polysemic: a coextensive concept that is physical, metaphysical, and relational (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). The multiplicity of types of bordering practices and imaginaries mitigates a linear analysis of migrant experiences (Tazreiter, 2004, 2015, 2017). The border relates as much to markets and human subjectivities as it does to ways of being in the world, which carry values and histories through the embodied self, or to the outline of the nation-state, with borders labelled most potently in recent political rhetoric as the sites of 'crisis migration'. The multiple meanings and policy implications of the border are manifest in migrant experiences and suffering (Sontag, 2013). An analysis of the border as membrane introduces an additional level of complexity to theorizing the border (Bauböck, 2015; Tazreiter et al., 2016), as do considerations of the border as paper barriers created through bureaucratic exclusion and as a 'non-place' or extra-territorial zone (Augé, 1992). It is not only the physical barrier of the border that mediates the opportunities for entry and access to rights, it is also the complex layers of law and of politics.

The Australian context:
An immigrant nation with a punitive refugee policy

Before examining case studies of visual interventions in more detail, it is worth considering the broader context of Australian refugee policy. The history of Australia's refugee policy and the country's treatment of asylum seekers and irregular migrants exists within an immigrant 'settler society' (Dauvergne, 2015) built on waves of immigration since British colonization 230 years ago. Ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity are key aspects of contemporary Australian life. Up to forty per cent of the population are first- or second-generation immigrants. Notwithstanding this long history as an immigration nation, Australia's approach to asylum seekers is widely considered by researchers, intergovernmental organizations such as the UNHCR, and human rights activists to be uniquely punitive. The harshest treatment is applied to asylum seekers arriving by boat. The year 1992 marks the start of the mandatory and indefinite detention of all asylum seekers as 'unauthorized arrivals'. Asylum seekers, as well as those designated refugees at the end of a legal assessment procedure, have been systematically dehumanized and labelled undeserving 'queue jumpers' who will destabilize the orderly Australian immigration system (Juss, 2017; Tazreiter, 2004).

Although Australia has a long history of settling refugee and humanitarian entrants who come through a pre-determined resettlement system, in recent decades refugee arrivals have generated high levels of anxiety and fear in the

country. The degree of public debate over the arrival and reception of asylum seekers, the pointed political pronouncements, and copious media coverage are all incommensurate with the actual scale of asylum arrivals and their impact on the domestic population. At various points over the past two decades, even the anticipation of asylum arrivals has led to feverish public debate and anxieties about being swamped and overwhelmed by unwelcome and uninvited newcomers. The reality is that there is a small, yet steady arrival of asylum seekers, both by boat and by air, alongside a much more significant 'humanitarian' intake of refugees and people in 'refugee-like' situations who are selected for entry and resettlement in Australia.[2] As a country of immigration, Australia has a long history of proactive selection of immigrants according to specific categories that align with visa classes, such as skilled immigrants, family reunion immigrants, humanitarian and refugee immigrants, and, more recently, short-term migrant workers. The state and government, which are intent on controlling immigration, do not deal well with spontaneous arrivals that disrupt this orderly approach to immigration (Tazreiter, 2004).

One development that is especially pertinent to the argument presented here is that since 13 August 2012, asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat without authorization (a valid visa) have been subject to 'offshore' or 'third country' processing on Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Australia first introduced 'offshore processing' in Nauru and PNG in 2001 under a plan called the 'Pacific Solution'. Offshore processing was suspended under the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in late 2007. It was resumed under the new Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard in August 2012 and has continued under successive conservative Liberal-National coalition governments ever since. Offshore processing means that asylum seekers are forcibly transferred to Nauru or PNG and undergo a process to determine refugee status in those countries. This policy has received considerable negative scrutiny both within Australia and internationally as a breach of human rights standards and the spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Notably, since 2013 the conservative governments under Prime Ministers Abbott and Turnbull have also imposed a culture of secrecy and silence within the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (now called Home Affairs), with little information officially available to journalists, lawyers, and the Australian public. The conditions and day-to-day circumstances in offshore detention have also been further distanced from public scrutiny through the privatization of service provision at these facilities. Papua New Guinea and Nauru, the two

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2   For a history of Australia's response to refugees and asylum seekers, see Neumann, K. (2004) *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record*, Sydney, UNSW Press.

sites of detention centres under 'Operation Sovereign Borders', are poor, developing countries that receive significant foreign aid from Australia. The Australian government has attempted to cover up abuses faced by asylum seekers in offshore detention through federal legislation that restricts press freedom and discourages whistleblowing by employees of detention centres. Infringements on press freedom have been introduced via amendments made in 2014 to the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979 (Cth)*. This legislation prohibits media reporting of 'special intelligence operations'. Freedom of the press has been further curtailed by the enactment of the *Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Amendment (Data Retention) Act 2015 (Cth)*, which provides the executive branch with new powers to apply for 'journalist information warrants' that can compel telecommunications companies to surrender journalists' metadata, which may reveal a confidential source. Concerns that this would stifle investigative journalism were confirmed after documents obtained under the *Freedom of Information Act* revealed that 'eight stories on Australia's immigration policy [in 2014] were referred to the Australian Federal Police for the purpose of "identification, and if appropriate, prosecution" of the persons responsible for leaking the information' (Williams, 2015). Federal legislation has also criminalized whistleblowing, such as provisions under the *Border Force Act 2015 (Cth)* that allow a prison sentence of up to two years to be imposed on detention centre workers who publicly leak information on conditions at the centres. Medical professionals providing services to asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru are subject to a range of sanctions for disclosing any details of the detention environment to third parties. In October 2018, Chief Medical Officer Nicole Montana was dismissed for 'breaching rules' in defying the Nauru government on medical transfers. Only a month earlier her predecessor, Christopher Jones, had been removed from Nauru and had his visa cancelled for similar reasons (Koziol, 2018). Another senior medical officer on Nauru, Dr Nick Martin, was also dismissed for publicizing the deliberate medical neglect of refugees and asylum seekers on the island. In January 2019 he was awarded the *Bluprint for Free Speech Whistleblowing Prize* in London (Doherty, 2019). In accepting the prize, Martin said he was appalled to discover an offshore regime willing to risk the death of a refugee to uphold the Australian government's policy of keeping asylum seekers from entering Australia, concerned only with the public relations fallout of someone's death:

> A child setting themselves on fire was unacceptable, but a young man hanging himself was acceptable, that was OK. You were trying to have a conversation with the Australian Border Force saying 'this person is going to die', and they were essentially saying 'well, let's see if you're right'. (Doherty, 2019)

Despite the veil of secrecy that surrounds offshore detention, human rights activists, filmmakers, and detainees themselves have documented the life of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island (Orner, 2016; Gleeson, 2016). In the years

since 2012, the sexual and physical abuse of detainees has been documented by the UN, human rights groups, and detainees. In one case, guards murdered an asylum seeker; medical neglect has been documented, leading in several cases to the deaths of asylum seekers. Self-harm, suicide, and high rates of mental illness are widespread. On 13 February 2017 a group of international legal scholars lodged a Communiqué with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court on the circumstances in Nauru and Manus Island, charging that the detention of refugees and asylum seekers amounts to a crime against humanity (Stanford Law School, 2017). The submission details the range of human rights violations, including systematic and directed attacks. The Papua New Guinea High Court ruled in 2016 that the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was unconstitutional.

The conditions and day-to-day circumstances of life for asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island have only become visible to Australians through the work of human rights activists, filmmakers, and lawyers who make unofficial visits and, notably, through the efforts of detained asylum seekers themselves. Mobile, digital technologies are vital in producing, tracking, and distributing the artistic interventions explored in the examples detailed below. While some asylum seekers have been resettled in third states, many remain on Nauru and Manus Island, still waiting for their cases to be resolved after five years of incarceration (Grewcock, 2017; Cave, 2017).

Asylum seekers and refugees subject to offshore processing since 2012 on Nauru and Manus Island are largely invisible to the Australian public: they are effectively 'disappeared' through media and information blackouts that also include visa restrictions for lawyers and human rights organizations. These developments do not occur in a vacuum. They are closely related to social attitudes to immigration and outsiders, to dominant tropes in the nation's self-imagination, and the collective memories that are prioritized in these social and political processes. Visual and story-telling media have been utilized by activists and artists opposed to Australia's policies on refugees and asylum seekers to tell different stories.

Creating new visual and narrative cultures of resistance

The advocacy by and creations of Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist from Iran who has been detained for over six years on Manus Island, are especially convincing evidence of the potency of visual culture. In 2017 Behrouz, along with collaborator and co-director Arash Kamali Sarvestani, released the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, which documents life in the detention centre over a period of time and is pieced together from hundreds of mobile phone clips and written texts. This film, along with other forms of visual and material culture and communication, have provided the Australian public access to counter-narratives to the dominant

government narratives that generate fear, mistrust, and hatred towards refugees and asylum seekers. Mainstream media outlets have largely been unable to obtain permission for their journalists to travel to Nauru and Manus Island or gain entry to the detention centres. Eva Orner's 2016 film *Chasing Asylum* is the result of an exception to this general rule. It documents asylum seekers' journeys through Indonesia, Cambodia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iran, and ultimately Manus and Nauru and shows the conditions detainees face on Nauru through footage shot by asylum seekers using mobile phones (Orner, 2016). Other evidence has been gathered by official visits to Manus and Nauru by the UNHCR and by international and Australian human rights organizations.

The story of the men and boys who live in the prison-like immigration detention facility emerges through the narrative form of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. The film is a meditation on the way everyday life proceeds in detention on a remote island such as Manus, giving Australians an account of the physical and psychological strain and trauma of those who are detained. The film is particularly powerful in the context of the Australian policies that have rendered asylum seekers and refugees invisible to the Australian public through these media and information blackouts and visa restrictions on lawyers and human rights organizations. *Chauka* is the name of a solitary confinement cell within the detention centre and is also the name of a bird found only on this island, a bird that is the symbol of the island, decorating its flag.

With the release of the film *Chauka*, Boochani received numerous invitations to appear in person at his film's premiere at international film festivals. The Australian government denied him a visa to travel to any of these. Nevertheless, Boochani has made appearances for interviews at numerous public events and screenings of his film via social media with the assistance of his translator, friend, and collaborator, Omid Tofighian. In this way, the Australian public and an international public have come to know the work, the face, and voice of Boochani and his fellow detainees.

Behrouz Boochani is the subject of numerous feature articles published in the international press during his detention on Manus Island. In 2018 he published a book of poetry, reflection, and criticism called *No Friend but the Mountains* with translator and collaborator Omid Tofighian (Boochani, 2018). Able to be virtually present thanks to technology, Boochani also collaborates with other writers and artists – even while in detention.

The Australian photographer Hoda Afshar has created a portrait of Boochani as well as a video installation that engages with the situation refugees face on Manus Island and Nauru. In describing his creative collaboration with artists and photographers, Boochani says:

> In my book *No Friend But the Mountains*, I describe the experience of refugees being exiled to Manus Island and our experience with the professional photographers

assigned to photograph us at the airport as we arrived. I explain this situation from the perspective of a defenceless subject – a completely passive agent lacking any semblance of power. By contrast, the photographers have the capacity to totally dominate our bodies – targeting us with their cameras, claiming ownership by taking photos of us. A kind of relationship exists between photographer and subject; in fact, a one-sided power dynamic between them.

On Manus, during the years that followed, I have had the opportunity to work closely with some of the most successful and well-known photographers and journalists in the world. However, in some cases, the oppressive power dynamic still conditions our interactions and has given me a strong sense of grievance. Within these relationships, the camera is weaponised and aimed at the subject in an attempt to capture an image of a refugee that evokes the most heightened sense of compassion possible.

In these cases, the refugee is a kind of subject that represents passivity: a being without agency, a being without personhood, a being without the nuances and complexities that constitute the human condition, a being without power, a being without a free and independent identity. In this relationship, the gaze of the camera or the journalist is a weapon that eliminates the personhood of subjects – they 'de-identify' the refugees.

However, the portrait of me by Hoda Afshar stands in opposition to a fixed and static image. It is a critique of the hackneyed impression of a refugee that has become idealised around the world. In this work, the subject is not passive; rather, he is fully aware of the image-making process and active in the production. In fact, he is a co-creator. One might say that the subject is also the creative source behind this work. In this portrait, one can see fire, one can see smoke – clearly, the context of the image is not unlike a comprehensive *mise en scène* produced by an artist. (Boochani, 2018b) (Fig. 11.1)

Behrouz Boochani and more than 547 other men and boys continue to be held on Manus Island without a resettlement option in spite of many having been granted formal refugee status several years ago. More than 359 men, women, and children were still being held on Nauru as of 26 March 2019, according to the Australian Refugee Council.[3] As outlined above, a key issue for lawyers, doctors, human rights activists, and concerned Australians with respect to the detention regimes on Manus Island and Nauru is the veil of secrecy that hangs over all aspects of detention and daily life for the 3,127 asylum seekers that have been sent to Manus Island and Nauru since the second wave of offshore detention arrangements that began in September 2012.

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3   https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/operation-sovereign-borders-offshore-detention-statistics/6/

Figure 11.1. Portrait of Behrouz Boochani, Manus Island, 2018.
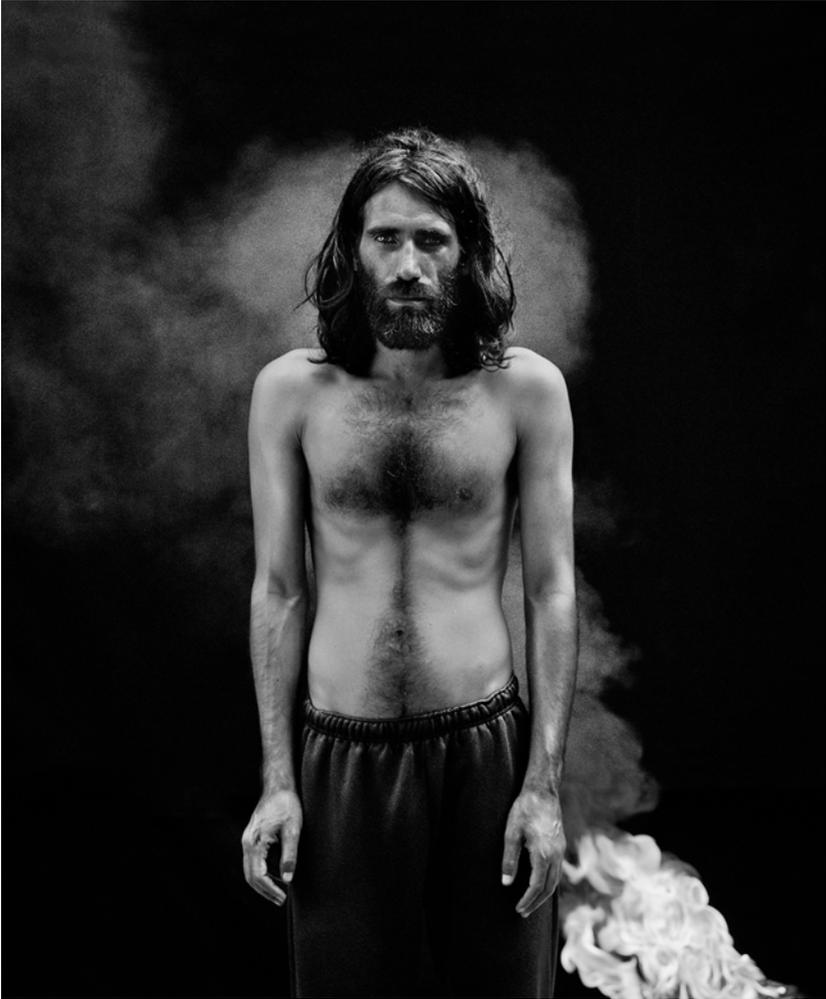
Source: Hoda Afshar.

In August 2016, *The Guardian* newspaper published the so-called *Nauru Files*. These files detailed 2,116 separate incident reports written by staff in the Nauru detention centre between 2013 and 2015. The incident reports include cases of assault, sexual abuse, self-harm, child abuse, and sub-standard living conditions. The reports were leaked to journalists at *The Guardian* and published in toto. In the absence of regular media access to Nauru, a group of artists, designers, and

advocates, together with human rights groups, commissioned an art exhibition featuring works responding to the *Nauru Files*.[4]

This intervention resulted in the exhibition *All We Can't See*, which opened in early 2018. It included works by prominent Australian artists as well as by refugees detained by the Australian government. Supported by Human Rights Watch, the exhibition was seen in Sydney and Melbourne and had an active virtual presence on social media. Well-known Australian artists such as Ben Quilty, Luke Scibberas, and Aida Tomescu are featured alongside refugee and asylum seeker artists such as Abbas Alaboudi and Ravi. Each work responds to one or more of the incident reports. Many of the works transport the audience into the world of abuse and self-harm regularly experienced by those in the Nauru detention centre – including the slashing of bodies, the sewing together of lips, and attempted suicide.

One of these powerful artworks is the photograph by Pia Johnson depicting a naked young woman with her back to the viewer and her nakedness shielded by a translucent curtain, a shower curtain. The incident report Johnson responded to was a complaint by a female asylum seeker to a teacher:

> I was asked on Friday (26-9-2014) by a fellow teacher [REDACTED 1] if I would sit with an asylum seeker [REDACTED 2] who was sobbing. She is a classroom helper for the children. A secondary teacher assistant [REDACTED 3] was present. She talked about several situations, some from Christmas Island, some from RPC3. She reported that she has been asking for a 4-minute shower as opposed to 2 minutes. Her request has been accepted on condition of sexual favours. It is a male security person. She did not state if this has or hasn't occurred. The security officer wants to view a boy or girl having a shower. (*Nauru Files*)

The artistic representations of the refugee issue by Australian artists resonate in other parts of the world, such as Poland, Hungary, Austria, and also the United States of America, where the politics of new nationalism and assertions of 'migrant crises' are also used to punish and deter refugees seeking safety and protection.

Conclusion

The figure of the migrant is by now a central part of contemporary Australian society, part of the ongoing contestation of belonging and of home, of insiders and outsiders, of visible and less visible peoples. Refugees and asylum seekers are one type of migrant, though special obligations are owed to them as outlined in legal instruments such as the Refugee Convention of 1951 and the Universal Declaration

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4   https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/gallery/2018/feb/03/all-we-cant-see-illustrating-the-nauru-files

of Human Rights of 1948. Although Australia may be geographically distant from the major refugee-producing regions and also from the many protracted 'crises' in the reception of refugees and irregular migrants, it is nevertheless an important case in the context of the global politics of refugees and migrants. Many Western countries have pointed to the Australian approach to asylum seeker arrivals and its tough border control regime as exemplary and worthy of emulation.

This essay has examined artistic interventions and visual culture as a particular politics – a way of framing, interpreting, and understanding social life and change. These works have been well received among wide audiences in Australia as well as in other parts of the world, notably across Europe and North America. Questions of *representation* and of *recognition* emerge through an elaboration of the specific geographies and the cultures of settlement, cultures of sanctuary, and cultures of home. The artistic and literary interventions detailed above indicate a hierarchy of human life and of the value attached to human life through the practices of immigration detention enforced on refugees and asylum seekers who wish only to reach Australia in order to claim protection. How then do the hierarchies of value attached to human life impact the way humans *see* each other and engage with the visualizations recorded in the context of segregation and exclusion? The discussion of borders that opened this essay suggests that a particular type of border is in operation in the Australian case, a 'border of disappearance'. Through the artistic and narrative interventions examined in this essay, it is made viscerally clear that it is the refugees and asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru who live this double disappearance. Australians and the Australian state are implicated in enacting the 'border of disappearance'.

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