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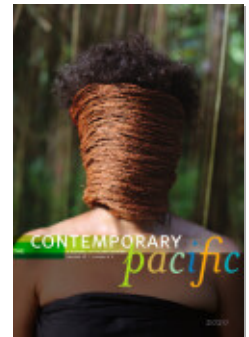
“It Is Not Because They Are Bad People”: Australia’s
Refugee Resettlement in Papua New Guinea and Nauru

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The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 32, Number 2, 2020, pp. 435-448 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0036>



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*“It Is Not Because They Are
Bad People”: Australia’s Refugee
Resettlement in Papua New Guinea
and Nauru*

*J C Salyer, Steffen Dalsgaard,
and Paige West*

Trump: Why haven’t you let them out? Why have you not let them into your society?

Turnbull: Okay, I will explain why. It is not because they are bad people. It is because in order to stop people smugglers, we had to deprive them of the product. So we said if you try to come to Australia by boat, even if we think you are the best person in the world, even if you are a Noble [sic] Prize winning genius, we will not let you in. Because the problem with the people—

Trump: That is a good idea. We should do that too. You are worse than I am.¹

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 29.4 million refugees and asylum seekers around the world,² and the total number of forcibly displaced individuals is 70.8 million, meaning there are currently more displaced people than at any time since the end of World War II (UNHCR 2018, 2019). The essays in this dialogue are concerned with the people affected by Australia’s policy of detaining, processing, and resettling asylum seekers on Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Despite referring to merely an infinitesimal percentage of this human tragedy, Australia’s policy, as well as its consequences, nevertheless merits careful attention, not simply because of the need to witness the deprivations and cruelties visited on the individuals subjected to it and the disruptive impacts it has had on the “host” communities but also because it has set a dangerous precedent

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 32, Number 2, 435–448
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for Western, developed nations eager to defer, deny, and outsource their humanitarian obligations.

As a regional policy in the Pacific, Australia's use of Manus Island and Nauru as sites of detention and resettlement depends on and reinscribes colonial and postcolonial relationships of dispossession and exploitation and is rooted in longstanding colonial policies, ideologies, and assumptions that see the island Pacific as isolated, remote, and primitive. Beyond just being an example of how historic colonialism has conditioned unequal relationships in the Pacific, this arrangement, sometimes referred to as the "Pacific Solution," shows how colonialism, as a continuing process and ideology, still operates in the creation and re-creation of global inequality, in the control of non-European populations, and in the protection of Euro-American metropolises from the consequences of imperial actions abroad.

The attempt to resettle refugees in Nauru and PNG is a novel use of Australia's unequal political and economic power to impose burdens and obligations on its neighbors in the Pacific while signaling an intent to deny assistance to displaced people across the broader region. For the nations of PNG and Nauru, cooptation into Australia's Pacific Solution has generated negative international attention, as human rights advocates and the media have criticized the conditions to which refugees have been subjected. For instance, one commentator in the *Sydney Morning Herald* decried that "in 'processing' them, we let them stew for perhaps six years in a violent and rat-infested hell-hole" (Farrelly 2014). For the local communities in which refugees have been detained and resettled, the policy has been disruptive and disorienting. These small, tightly woven communities have experienced jarring change as securitization of the asylum seekers has locked them away, making them seem a new, mysterious, and potentially dangerous category of people, and as security forces have themselves been a source of violence and fear. Economic inequality has also resulted from an unequal distribution of benefits. While some local community members have obtained waged labor connected to the detention centers or related projects, wages paid to locals have been considerably less than what expat contractors have been paid, and prices for food and everyday necessities have increased (Chandler 2015; Wallis and Dalsgaard 2016). For local communities who generally receive no welfare benefits from the state, seeing asylums seekers and refugees receive what appear to be generous benefits of cash, clothing, and air-conditioned accommodation has sometimes stoked animosity and envy (Kanngieser, this issue; Salyer, this

issue). Additionally, the image of Manus and Nauru as benighted detention centers for asylum seekers occludes the not-so-slow violence of fossil-fuel capitalism's climate change and environmental damage, which has resulted in many local populations on Nauru and Manus Island finding themselves facing displacement and uncertain futures.

AUSTRALIA'S PACIFIC SOLUTION

Since the 1990s, Australia has implemented increasingly hostile policies toward asylum seekers, including mandatory detention and affording refugees diminished rights by providing Temporary Protection Visas rather than permanent legal status. In 2001, when a Norwegian shipping vessel, the *MV Tampa*, rescued 438 people from a boat of asylum seekers and attempted to disembark them to Australia, Prime Minister John Howard refused to allow them entry into the country, used military force to take over the ship, and negotiated an agreement with Nauru to create a detention center for offshore processing of asylum seekers. The Australian government subsequently created an additional detention center on Manus Island, and the offshore processing of asylum seekers became known as the "Pacific Solution," operating between 2001 and 2007. In 2007, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, of the Labor Party, ended the Pacific Solution's use of Nauru and Manus Island to process asylum seekers, although the detention center on Christmas Island, an Australian territory, continued to operate.

By 2009, the number of people arriving by boat had increased to 2,867, with a further increase to 6,900 in 2010. Although the number of arrivals decreased somewhat in 2011, it increased again to 17,596 in 2012 and to 21,231 in 2013 (Phillips 2017a). Many of the asylum seekers were coming from areas destabilized by contemporary geopolitical conflicts, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Myanmar, and Syria, as well as a large number of "stateless" individuals and refugees from Iran. Indeed, while the number of asylum seekers increased during this time, the increase was consistent with the overall global increase in displaced people.

In 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard attempted to address the issue by proposing to send eight hundred asylum seekers to Malaysia in exchange for four thousand refugees who had already been processed by the UNHCR, the so-called "Malaysian Solution," but the proposal was struck down by the Australian High Court because Malaysia was not a party to the UN

Refugee Convention (Penovic 2011). As the number of asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat increased, so too did the number of deaths at sea, with hundreds of asylum seekers dying in dozens of incidents (SBS News 2013). Because of the increase in both boat arrivals and asylum-seeker deaths, asylum seekers' continued arrival by boat became a major political issue. In September 2012, Prime Minister Gillard revived the Pacific Solution practice of transferring asylum seekers to Nauru and Manus Island for offshore processing (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013).

During the 2013 election campaign, migration remained a central topic, with Tony Abbott, the leader of a Liberal/National Coalition, promising to “stop the boats” and outlining a plan called “Operation Sovereign Borders,” which was described as “a military-led response to combat people smugglers and to protect our borders” (Coalition 2013). Kevin Rudd, who had replaced Gillard as prime minister, took a similar hard line against asylum seekers, implementing the Regional Resettlement Agreement (RRA) with PNG on 19 July 2013 and signing a similar agreement with Nauru on 3 August 2013 (Phillips 2017b). Under these agreements, all asylum seekers arriving by boat without a visa would be transferred to detention centers on either Manus Island or Nauru. Moreover, this policy went beyond offshore detention and processing of asylum seeker claims because it stipulated that even individuals found to be “genuine” refugees would not be settled in Australia but instead would be settled in PNG or Nauru or would be held in those countries until a “third” country—that was not Australia—could be found for resettlement. When Tony Abbott's Coalition government took office in September 2013, it implemented Operation Sovereign Borders, which continued the use of offshore processing and resettlement in PNG and Nauru and implemented other policies, including using Australian forces to “turn back” asylum-seeker boats on the high seas and reinstating the practice of providing refugees with Temporary Protection Visas rather than permanent immigration statuses.

THE PACIFIC SOLUTION AND LOCAL SOVEREIGNTIES

For almost two decades, Australia has used offshore processing and detention on island sites (ie, Christmas Island, Nauru, and Manus Island) to deter asylum seekers by denying them any benefit from arriving in Australia without a visa. While Christmas Island is an Australian external territory,³ the other two are former UN Trust Territories (or “colonies”)

administered by Australia. Leaving aside for now questions of continued challenges to their sovereignty, these two sites still rely on Australia as a primary trade partner and source of development funding. According to some commentators, Australia's resolve to uphold a regime of offshore processing of asylum seekers has resulted in an agenda of national interest aligning refugee and immigration policy with regional aid and diplomacy throughout the Pacific—that is, aid in return for taking on asylum seekers (Fraenkel 2016). Gary Juffa, a member of the PNG Parliament, has interpreted PNG's acceptance of this bargain as “basically allowing ourselves to grovel at the feet of Australian neo-colonialism” (Chandler 2015).

The placement of refugee processing centers on Nauru and Manus Island has naturally affected the asylum seekers forced to go there, but it has also impacted economic and political circumstances in the host countries and locally among the centers' neighbors. While economic impacts have differed based on the specifics of each country—for instance, the creation of jobs and inflow of development funding has been especially important on Nauru, which differs from PNG in terms of its income from natural resources (see Fraenkel 2016, 282)—effects on political, legal, and democratic apparatuses, as much as on local identities and positions within a regional polity, have been severely felt in both Nauru and Manus Island. This has been stated before (see Firth 2016; Fraenkel 2016; Wallis and Dalsgaard 2016), but it is acutely demonstrated by the contributions to this dialogue.

The aim of this dialogue is to illuminate how different groups of people are affected by Australia's policy of detaining, processing, and resettling asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. Sarah Keenan's contribution shows how Australia's refugee policy relies on the imagination of non-European or non-Western lands as “empty” and of the oceanic spaces between them as “lawless”—a lawlessness that the bodies of asylum seekers are condemned to carry with them by Australian immigration authorities (see also Salyer, this issue; West, this issue; Dalsgaard and Otto, this issue; Kaiku, this issue). For Australia, the notion of sovereignty is both an absolute right that can be used as a shield against international human rights claims and the embodiment of its claim to the legitimate use of violence against those who would transgress that sovereignty. For Nauru and Manus Island, centuries of colonial, postcolonial, and capitalist penetration make such an impermeable version of sovereignty illusory. It is the inapplicability of a Westphalian notion of sovereignty in such contexts that has resulted in new descriptions of sovereignty in colonial, occupied,

and Indigenous contexts, such as nested sovereignties (Simpson 2014), co-sovereignties (Maaka and Fleras 2005), or fragmented sovereignties (Gazit 2009). Indeed, a recurring theme in these contributions is how asylum seekers and refugees, as humans outside of membership in a sovereign territory, are denied individual autonomy and sovereignty, which Behrouz Boochani's memoir *No Friend but the Mountains*—reviewed by Patrick Kaiku in his contribution—demonstrates in full. The perceived “outsiderness” or “lawlessness” of asylum seekers results in a violent negation of the right to even the most basic existence (West, this issue).

Paige West's contribution to this dialogue shows how the asylum seekers' *homo sacer* status as “bare life” without legal rights or social recognition forces them to struggle for even a mundane level of personal agency over their own lives. For refugees and other migrants, it is often the things that are most important to their personal identity that mark them for exclusion. Indeed, a common experience for refugees is learning that one's own native language is not just marginalized and devalued but, worse still, is seen as a badge of difference and deficiency. The result of this language loss is both a significant wounding of one's own subjectivity and a loss of connection with personal, familial, and communal histories (Arendt 2007). Kireni Sparks-Ngege's contribution shows us how similar processes of devaluation work to undermine Indigenous languages in situ. Her work responding to language loss on Lou Island in Manus Province reminds us that the very narratives that paint PNG and Manus Province as undeveloped places of despair are rooted in colonial and capitalist ideologies that discount the value of Indigenous knowledge and resources while simultaneously undermining the ability of those knowledges and resources to reproduce and grow. In places like Manus Province, whose territorial sovereignty has been ignored for centuries, sovereignty is defined not as policing physical borders but as protecting and fostering local language and cultural practices within the globalized local.

Pressure may come from multiple sources of migration and change. For example, refugee situations are also generated by the onset of climate change, as Robert Bino argues in his contribution. Anja Kanngieser likewise illustrates the interconnection of ecological disaster and refugee policy, showing how for Nauru the offshore detention facility's intrusion on local sovereignty is set against a longer history defined by devastating colonial phosphate extraction. The structural violence of colonialism combined with the slow violence (Nixon 2011) of extractive capitalism put Nauru in the tractable ecological and economic position of having to agree to

accept Australia's asylum seekers. Kanngieser shows how current refugee policy ties into long-term European/Western assumptions about the right to continue relationships of exploitation that formed under colonialism.

Similarly, the history of Manus Province is one of colonization by Germany and Australia, military occupation by Japan and the United States during World War II, and recolonization by Australia after the war. Local sovereignty under such circumstances cannot be defined as exclusive territorial control; rather, it is defined by actions and beliefs that are generative of autonomy. Steffen Dalsgaard and Ton Otto's contribution shows that for Manusians one such enduring practice has been an ethos of hospitality that is central to its people's history and identity. This Manusian self-perception of their home as a tranquil "paradise" and of themselves as welcoming to outsiders is threatened by the Regional Resettlement Agreement, which has introduced a large population of strangers who cannot be accommodated within the small community's social and material limits. Likewise, J C Salyer's contribution addresses how, within a neoliberal political regime, the inequality of PNG's resource extraction economy means asylum seekers and marginalized Papua New Guineans are encouraged to despise each other, despite the fact that both groups' destitution is in the service of protecting the privileges of the beneficiaries of capitalism (see also Robbins 2017). At the same time, the contributors to this dialogue would hasten to point out that there have been numerous examples of responses from individuals, communities, and government employees in Nauru and PNG motivated by compassion, care, and even love, which emerged as a consequence of being witness to the plight of asylum seekers.

Throughout the dialogue, the contributors allude to the consequences of the geopolitical structures of inequality generated by the contemporary neoliberal political economy. Australia's engagement in the global "war on terror" and warfare in the Middle East exacerbated the global refugee crisis, and the number of asylum seekers arriving at Australian shores increased. As a parallel, at the time of writing, Australia is suffering from the worst bushfires in living memory, and some scientists doubt that Australian biodiversity will recover. However, should sea levels rise as predicted by current climate models, many of the neighboring Pacific Islands—Nauru and PNG included (see Kanngieser, this issue; Bino, this issue)—will not recover (see Teaiwa 2019). They will undoubtedly be the source of "climate refugees," whom Australia *should* have a harder time turning back when they come knocking at the door of the world's fifteenth largest emitter of greenhouse gases (Flannery 2020).

As the contributions to this dialogue demonstrate, since the first asylum seekers were moved to Manus Island and Nauru in 2013 under the Regional Resettlement Agreement, the rights and well-being of asylum seekers have been continuously abused and ignored, and the communities in which asylum seekers have been detained and resettled have experienced seismic disruptions. Nevertheless, supporters of this new Pacific Solution have trumpeted it as an unmitigated success, with then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull bragging in 2015, “We do have a tough border policy, you could say it’s a harsh policy, but it has worked” (Doherty 2016). If the Pacific Solution is a humanitarian catastrophe and a disruptive intrusion to communities in Nauru and Manus Province, how can it be called a success? The answer is that it was never meant to be a solution to a humanitarian crisis—it was meant to be a solution to the partisan political issue of media coverage about asylum seekers during an election year. In that respect, it has worked as a ploy by Australian politicians (from both Labor and Coalition governments) to both rally and appease Australian voters without ever having to do the difficult work of educating them about Australia and its allies’ relationships to the displaced people of the world or about the importance of meeting international obligations.

“STOP THE BOATS”

A simple three word refrain—“stop the boats”—has been the Australian government’s justification for its policy of offshore detention and resettlement of asylum seekers since 2013 and has been used to erase and excuse the severe impacts and disruptions it has caused to the lives of both asylum seekers and local populations in PNG and Nauru. Developed as a campaign slogan, “stop the boats” has a simplifying anti-politics that ignores and excuses Operation Sovereign Borders’ militarized response to asylum seekers and the Regional Resettlement Agreement’s mobilization of political economic and colonial power inequities to construct a detention archipelago outside of the Australian public’s view.

Australia’s Operation Sovereign Borders and the practice of relocating asylum seekers to Manus Island and Nauru demonstrates the slippery nature of the concepts of sovereignty, territory, and international borders. Viewed from PNG and Nauru, it is clear that Australia’s project implicates overlapping and conflicting ideas about whose sovereignty was being violated and defended on international, national, local, and bodily levels. Australia implemented this project based on the claim that its national

territorial sovereignty was endangered by the unauthorized asylum seekers, and it responded by creating an offshore resettlement scheme that impinged on the sovereign interests of the national governments of PNG and Nauru (see Kanngieser, this issue). Moreover, local communities have raised concerns that they have been excluded from consultation and consideration even though they were directly affected by the project. Finally, as demonstrated by some of the pieces in this collection, the recognition and protection of the international human rights that asylum seekers are meant to have has been ignored.

Place is to local sovereignties what territoriality is to nation-states. Both of these spaces have a physical boundedness to their respective geographies, but no less significant is their construction through socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces. Geographer Doreen Massey challenged us to create a far more complex geographic imaginary and politics of place by understanding place as both “territorially grounded” and “responsive to relational space” (2007, 156). Massey pointed out that the wealthy, developed nations of the world project economic and cultural influences that affect the lives of people worldwide but maintain “hegemonic geographical imaginations” regarding the control of their own bounded geographical territory (2007, 24; see also Keenan, this issue). The Pacific Solution is based on Australia’s claims to its own rigid, bounded territorial sovereignty and on the simultaneous negation of the costs and consequences caused by its policies, actions, and interventions when they occur beyond its borders in other parts of the globe. To address this lopsided notion of territory, Massey enjoined us to consider the historical, social, and economic relationships that converge in the making of place to understand the “politics of place beyond place” (2007, 15). For many asylum seekers, much of the basis of their dispossession is rooted in policies and decisions made in Western metropolises beyond their control. Nevertheless, the Pacific Solution is premised on the idea that “unauthorized maritime arrivals” are individual wrongdoers selfishly jumping the queue. Similarly, discourses that focus on Manus Island and Nauru as places where asylum seekers’ rights are violated tend to ignore the origins of the policy as a purposeful rejection of human rights obligations made in Australia by political leaders attempting to appeal to Australian voters. Both the simplistic “stop the boats” rhetoric and much of the human rights advocacy for asylum seekers fail to recognize how the plights of asylum seekers and local communities have diachronic and synchronic origins and connections far beyond the here and now visible on Manus Island and Nauru.

CONCLUSION

This dialogue focuses on multifaceted concerns and responses that emerge at different political scales and in different localities and that are rooted in complex histories. As the contributions show, to understand where the Pacific Solution fits into the politics of place for Manus Island and Nauru, one must attend to the particular histories of their peoples' interactions with outsiders; the colonial appropriation, exploitation, and disposessions that underlie Australia's relationship to PNG and Nauru; the vulnerable position of Pacific Island nations due to historic and ongoing ecological devastation; and what it means to displace universal human rights obligations onto places that already labor under socioeconomic and ecological vulnerability.

If the inequalities of colonial relationships and extractive capitalism conditioned the implementation of the Pacific Solution, the incipient displacement of masses of people due to the looming climate crisis haunts its implications. That colonial relationships were conditioned on and produced hierarchical valuations (and devaluations) of human life is clear beyond the need for detailed argument. What the contributions to this dialogue show with disturbing clarity is how the relationships, ideologies, and processes of colonialism continue to operate with dire consequences. For the beneficiaries of colonial and capitalist inequality, both asylum seekers and the people of PNG and Nauru are ontologically different kinds of people whose rights and security are always contingent on and secondary to their own interests. This denial of recognition requires a denial of the historical, economic, and political relationships that have created the very inequalities that form the basis of this disparagement. Wealthy capitalist nations like Australia depend on the hard borders of sovereignty to enable their global economic, political, and military activities abroad by keeping the undesirable consequences of those actions at bay. In their ability to naturalize global inequality, borders are the legal fiction par excellence.

Currently, the greatest issue of inequality is the unequal colonization of our shared biosphere by the elites in fossil-fuel capitalist nations, which amassed extreme wealth while imperiling life on Earth in general. In the Pacific, sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and freshwater salinization threaten to displace millions of people. Unfortunately, Australia's Pacific Solution approach to asylum seekers indicates that, barring a radi-

cal transformation in its attention to its behavior, its responsibilities, and its neighbors, Australia has no intention of providing sanctuary for the people and communities displaced by the climate crisis it has unapologetically helped to create.

* * *

SOME OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS *to this dialogue section were originally presented at the European Society for Oceanists conference in Cambridge, England, in December 2018. We are especially grateful for encouragement from Alex Mawyer and the other editors of The Contemporary Pacific.*

Notes

1 Excerpt from a transcript of the 28 January 2017 telephone conversation between US President Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull regarding the resettlement of asylum seekers in Papua New Guinea and Nauru to the United States (Miller, Vitkovskaya, and Fischer-Baum 2017).

2 The definition of what constitutes a refugee was established by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as amended by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and protects individuals who have fled their countries of origin and are unable to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Asylum seekers are individuals who are asserting claims to refugee status but have not yet had their claims adjudicated. International law, including the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enshrines the right of all people to seek asylum in other countries.

3 Christmas Island is an external territory of Australia, located in the Indian Ocean approximately 350 kilometers from Indonesia and 1,550 kilometers from the Australian mainland. The island was first used to detain asylum seekers in 2001, and it has been used for that purpose numerous times since. Residents of Christmas Island have experienced some of the same disruptions described in this dialogue, with one local representative explaining, “It’s been about vilifying people, it’s been about vilifying refugees, it’s drawn very negative attention to Christmas Island as a prison island rather than a tourist island. . . . It has not been good for the people socially, morally or economically in the long term” (Carmody 2019).

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Abstract

For almost two decades, Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island have been central to the Australian government's efforts to dispose of unwanted asylum seekers trying to reach Australian shores and to deter future asylum seekers from even attempting to obtain humanitarian protection. This policy, sometimes called the "Pacific Solution," has created challenges for local Pacific populations and has placed these two Pacific Islands in the center of a geopolitical humanitarian crisis. The rhetoric surrounding the role of Nauru and Manus often positions their contemporary dilemmas within a framework of continued imperialist or neocolonial challenges to their sovereignty by their Australian neighbor. But it also does much more. The essays in this dialogue section interrogate the Pacific Solution and surrounding discourses by exploring the critical circumstances enveloping the two islands, as well as the movement of refugees in the Pacific more generally. This draws attention both to international conflict and to climate change and the resulting environmental calamities in the Pacific region. Other contributions interrogate refugee policy through ethnographic studies of the encounters between refugees and host populations, revealing the pressure felt by local Pacific populations and the responses available to them under the current circumstances. Some of these responses exceed scholarship and demand narrative art (Kaiku; Sparks-Ngege), while others involve political dynamics that are entangled in responses to climate change (Bino) or in colonial histories (Dalsgaard and Otto; Kanngieser), as well as their logics and legal articulations (Keenan). The responses reveal issues of inclusion/exclusion denoting different sorts of "insiders" but also perspectives that require attention to intimacies and lived experience (Salyer; West).

KEYWORDS: Australia, Pacific Solution, refugees, asylum seekers, Manus, Nauru