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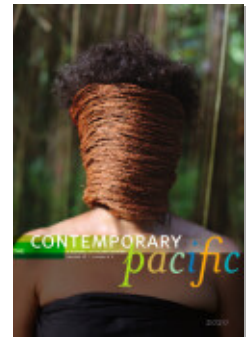
The Denial of Human Dignity in the Age of Human Rights under Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders

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*The Denial of Human Dignity
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Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders*

J C Salyer

In 2017, Mohammad was working in exchange for room and board at a small surf resort in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea (PNG). An Australian lawyer had made this arrangement for him so he could spend some time off of Manus Island, where he had been detained since attempting to reach Australia by boat from Indonesia to claim asylum. Four years earlier in Iran, Mohammad had been a university student who was politically active both by writing against the government and by participating in protests. When his father saw him on a television news broadcast attending a protest, he realized it was no longer safe for him in Iran, and at the age of twenty-five, he fled his home. Because, at that time, Iranians could obtain a visa on arrival in Indonesia, Mohammad went there and arranged to go to Australia by boat. His boat was intercepted by an Australian vessel on 23 July 2013, four days after the prime ministers of Australia and PNG signed the Regional Resettlement Agreement, which stipulated that Australia would refuse entry to asylum seekers who arrived by boat and instead send them to PNG. Under this policy and a similar agreement with Nauru, 3,127 asylum seekers were sent to Manus and Nauru as part of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders (Amnesty International 2019). By January 2014, there were 1,353 people being detained at what the Australian and PNG governments called the Manus Regional Processing Centre at the Longbrum Navy Base on Manus Island, which had been an Australian naval base during the colonial period and became a PNG naval base after independence (Crowe 2019).

How and why Manus Island became a cornerstone of Australian policy toward asylum seekers stems from the complex relationship between political economic dispossession and the biopolitical strategies and ideolo-

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gies that are used to justify global inequality and to relegate the wretched of the earth to spaces of exception. For the refugees and asylum seekers subject to the Regional Resettlement Agreement, how they are seen and described both by Australian policy and by people in PNG is not how they see themselves. As a result, not only are their material prospects sharply curtailed, their own subjective personhood is defined by narratives and assumptions not of their own making, and the aspects of their life that they see as most salient are ignored, erased, and denied (West, this issue). At the same time, the decision to use PNG as the site for the Regional Resettlement Agreement is premised on it being seen as a deterrent to future would-be asylum seekers, which requires PNG to be seen as a site of danger and despair. Since the detention center was opened in 2013, the people of Manus have had their home and themselves denigrated as dangerous and undesirable—a narrative deeply at odds with their perception of themselves (Dalsgaard and Otto, this issue).

For both asylum seekers and Papua New Guineans, the narratives, images, and ideologies that have so substantively and materially affected their lives have their origins in broader narratives of fear. Sara Ahmed's idea of affective economies describes how feelings and emotions are not properties innate to subjects or objects but rather circulate between subjects and objects so that the affective value of feelings and emotions get "stuck" to particular objects (2004). Particularly, Ahmed has shown how discourses around the *category* of asylum seeker circulate to create emotional responses of fear and hate toward *individual* asylum seekers as invaders, threats, and potential terrorists. Similarly, Paige West has shown how the dual image of "savage nature and savage native that derives from this nineteenth-century episteme endures today in the representational practices and rhetorical strategies that surround Papua New Guinea" and results in material dispossession and the denial of sovereignty (West 2016, 5). The siting of the Regional Resettlement Agreement in PNG links and magnifies both of these narratives and constructs both asylum seekers and Papua New Guineans as ontologically different kinds of people who are not entitled to the same sort of care, consideration, and respect as Australians.

On arrival on Manus Island, Mohammad was put in Camp Foxtrot, a facility left over from Australia's use of Longbrum to detain asylum seekers under a similar policy in 2001. He said the asylum seekers stayed in big, white tents, with fifteen people to a tent sleeping in bunk beds. The shower facilities were unsanitary, and he got infections from them. Many

of the refugees got infections, including another Iranian refugee, Hamid Kehazaei, who had a leg infection that was left untreated and eventually led to sepsis, a heart attack, and brain death (Doherty 2018). According to Mohammad, medical care was often nonexistent, with refugees simply being given Panadol (acetaminophen) for most ailments.

While the claim behind the Regional Resettlement Agreement was that PNG would accept responsibility for the refugees, process their asylum claims, and resettle them in PNG should they be found to be genuine refugees, in practice, the funding of the detention camp at Longbrum was paid for by Australia and run by contractors that Australia hired under terms dictated by Australia. Mohammad described all of the guards he encountered as really big, tattooed, and ex-military, a point he emphasized by standing with his chest puffed out, his legs apart, and his arms akimbo. Mohammad said that even though the guards claimed to be what he described as “church people,” they were not sympathetic to the refugees, and he said they treated them roughly as he pantomimed grabbing someone by the neck and putting them in a half nelson. He said that when he would call them “brother,” they would snap back that they “were not his brother.” Another refugee recounted some Australian guards telling a group of Afghan men that after they finished working on Manus, they were going to go back to Afghanistan so that they could “kill all of the men and fuck all of the girls and women.”

Although the refugee determination process was supposed to be carried out by the Refugee Division of the PNG Immigration and Citizenship Authority, at the time Australia began detaining asylum seekers on Manus, PNG had no law or process regarding the granting of refugee status (Cowie 2019). As a result, the asylum seekers languished for almost two years before the asylum determination process was set up and put into effect. Even though there were significant due process issues with processing asylum claims at an island prison isolated from the assistance of the refugee advocates typically available in Australia, the vast majority of men sent to Manus—over 70 percent—were still found to be entitled to refugee protection (Refugee Council of Australia 2019). Being found to be a refugee, however, changed little for Mohammad and the other refugees. As late as mid-2016, PNG had not finalized the creation of a refugee visa or work authorization documents, so even the few refugees who found work or were willing to try to find work were not allowed to. By the time I met Mohammad, almost five years of his life had been spent waiting in PNG with no job options, no education options, and no way to create a social

life. He pointed out that between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, most young people are finishing school, finding a career, and starting a life. By contrast, Mohammad said, “my work is my age,” by which he meant that the time he spent languishing on Manus was doing the work of deterring other refugees from seeking humanitarian protection in Australia. His life was meant to create what he called “dark publicity” for Australia.

While narratives that perpetuate images of deserving refugees versus undeserving economic migrants ignore the complex structures of inequality and the many factors that compel migration, one still must attend to Australia’s intentional conflation of refugees, who are entitled to humanitarian protection under international law, with criminal behavior. The architects of Operation Sovereign Borders, such as current Prime Minister Scott Morrison, coined their own neologism, “Illegal Maritime Arrivals,” in an attempt to characterize the refugees as the initial wrongdoers (Murphy 2013). In this way, Australia seeks to blame the asylum seekers for the cruelties and deprivation visited on them, despite the fact that, even under the problematic asylum determination process created by Australia, it has been determined that the majority of asylum seekers fled their homes to avoid persecution or death.

In 2017, the US ambassador to PNG was on a junket to New Ireland and met Mohammad at the surf resort where he was working. After speaking with him for just a few minutes, her reaction was to say, “Well, he ended up in paradise.” But, of course, her view of paradise is one of oceanfronts unspoiled by development and a lifestyle free of the hectic demands of e-mail and meetings, seen from the point of view of someone who takes for granted the mobility that comes with a US passport, the security that accompanies access to first-class health care, and the agency that comes from being recognized as a welcome member of the world community. It is the same view that fails to see the hardships of life for most non-elite Papua New Guineans. This wind-in-the-palm-fronds trope of paradise has long been used to erase the structural inequalities, dispossession practices, and discriminatory behavior that have shaped the lived experiences of Papua New Guineans under both colonial and neoliberal regimes. It should therefore not be surprising that it performs the same sort of erasure of Manus refugees’ suffering.

The hardships of life in PNG, the choice to site the regional processing center in PNG, and the inability to actually resettle refugees in PNG are intertwined. In discussing what she calls “enforcement archipelagos,” geographer Alison Mountz highlighted how historical colonial relation-

ships “haunt” the creation of offshore detention arrangements by creating “asymmetrical economies ripe for development through detention” (2011, 122). Similar to what James Ferguson observed of the resource extraction economies of Africa, it is not so much that PNG has been ignored by global capitalist development but rather that it has been subject to a “selectively territorialized investment” (Ferguson 2005, 378), and these mining and oil extraction projects have created enclave economies, staffed by expats with little discernable benefits to the vast majority of the public. As Ferguson put it, “Capital does not ‘flow’ . . . it hops, neatly skipping over most of what lies between” (2005, 379). Overreliance on resource extraction economies and underinvestment in supporting broader human capacities within PNG put the country in such a position that in July 2013, when then Prime Minister Peter O’Neil was whisked by plane to Brisbane, he believed he needed to accept Australia’s “Pacific Solution” in exchange for development aid.

This underdevelopment of PNG has been mobilized as a resource by Australia not simply because it put Prime Minister O’Neil in a tractable position of unequal bargaining power but also because it made PNG an effective deterrent to future would-be asylum seekers. If PNG offered opportunities to the poor and unconnected, if it were not ranked 155th out of the 189 countries on the 2019 UN Human Development Index (compared with Australia’s cushy number six position), and if the lives of refugees put there were not predictably and visibly miserable and precarious, then transporting asylum seekers there would not provide the “Pacific Solution” Australia was looking for. Indeed, the Australian government has spent over A\$70 million in its attempts to disseminate this message by sponsoring comic books, a movie, and advertising in refugee-sending countries to deter future arrivals (Whyte 2015; see also Fletcher 2014; Laughland 2014; Ryall 2016).

Both the people of PNG and the refugees are from the places in between the comfortable living spaces occupied by the beneficiaries of capitalism (Robbins 2017): from the hollowed-out spaces of capitalist uneven development (Smith 2008), from the shatter zones of colonial, settler-colonial, and postcolonial encounters (Ethridge and Shuck-Hall 2009), and from the sacrifice zones of ecological violence (Klein 2016). This shared precarity from parallel historical trajectories and contemporary political economic forces does not, however, necessarily generate recognition, sympathy, or alliance. Indeed, the perpetuation of racist, bigoted, and xenophobic prejudices has proven to be one of the crudest and most effec-

tive dividing practices of biopolitical governmentality (Foucault 2003). A PNG Immigration official who in 2014 worked on a committee that held public forums around the country to gather information to formulate a resettlement plan said that the main sentiment Papua New Guinean people expressed was concern about safety, which he said was because “people have been watching all sorts of movies” and “they believe that everyone who is a Muslim . . . is a terrorist and a bad guy and Al Qaeda.” Another member of this committee confirmed that many people expressed these sorts of concerns but also noted that when the committee spoke with the asylum seekers on Manus, they said they were afraid of Papua New Guineans and reproduced narratives about Melanesian savagery. This committee member summarized the problems contained within the two narratives that they were hearing from the PNG public and from the asylum seekers as “terrorists vs cannibals.” While there are certainly examples of members of PNG’s Refugee Division attempting to make the resettlement process work, as well as communities and individuals in PNG assisting and welcoming some of the refugees, PNG’s ownership of the refugee resettlement has always been titular at best. In an interview, PNG Cabinet Minister Justin Tkatchenko stated that it was “Australia’s problem,” and when asked if PNG wanted the refugees, he responded, “Not really. We really don’t need them” (Al Jazeera 2018).

Antagonism between Papua New Guineans and refugees cannot simply be put down to the interpolation of interpretive frames, because both groups really do live within challenging social, political, and economic landscapes in which safety and well-being cannot be taken for granted. To hopelessly mangle Tolstoy’s famous observation in *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy 1899, 1), all the beneficiaries of post-development economies are happy in the same overly consumptive way, but all precariously dispossessed peoples are unhappy in their own way. PNG and its highly unequal economy, which is based on enclaved resource extraction projects, presents unique challenges to the resettlement refugees, such as PNG’s vast sociolinguistic diversity, the fact that less than 15 percent of the population lives in urban areas with formal sector employment, and the fact that about 75 percent of people sustain themselves based on land that is held in customary land tenure (World Bank 2019b). In 2018, the per capita GDP for PNG was around US\$2,700, which compares with a per capita GDP of over US\$57,000 in Australia (World Bank 2019a). In talking with officials at PNG’s Refugee Division in 2016, I was told that resettlement decisions should be made on the basis of employment, because Papua New Guin-

eans do not receive any social welfare protection, such as unemployment or retirement benefits, and therefore the refugees cannot expect to receive such support themselves. At the same time, the officials acknowledged that it was unrealistic to think that most refugees with no family, no land, and no connections in PNG could support themselves, so the resettlement scheme provided a housing allowance for one year and a top-up of wages to 550 PNG kina a fortnight, which more than doubled what one would earn at PNG's minimum wage but would still work out to less than US\$170 per fortnight. Ultimately, the Refugee Division official concluded that if PNG were to accept non-Melanesian refugees in the future, from a practical point of view, it would really only be able to resettle skilled refugees. At the same time, however, he noted that such a policy was not in the spirit of the UN Refugee Convention, which was meant to apply to all people in need of international protection, not just those with employment skills. This official's observation highlights how Australia has perverted the fact that refugee rights are a universal human rights obligation into the assumption that all nations are universally able to meet that obligation. Under this assumption, refugees can be traded like carbon credits, or other fictive commodities, regardless of the social, economic, cultural, or political contexts of where they are actually settled.

For both the refugees and for people in PNG, Operation Sovereign Borders has been damaging and destructive. As a refugee resettlement program, it has been an unmitigated failure. As a development project, it has been typically ineffective, involving billions of dollars with little discernable benefit to the average Papua New Guinean. As a humanitarian project, it has been a cruel farce. From the point of view of politicians in Australia, however, it has allowed the deferral and displacement of humanitarian obligations for cynical political gain. For the privileged post-development nations of the world, the impermeability of borders has become indispensable to the maintenance of unevenly privileged positions of wealth, health, and safety, but to do so is inconsistent with professed human rights norms. Setting up human rights obligations in opposition to sovereignty, another international law principle, allows Australia to use the very uneven position of privilege that it seeks to protect to force its humanitarian obligations onto less prosperous and powerful nations.

Australia's concept of absolute and inviolate national sovereignty does not, however, extend to PNG's sovereignty except as a rhetorical evasion. One afternoon, in an attempt to speak with someone in the PNG Immigration and Citizenship office about the regional processing center, my

collaborator Paige West and I went to the refugee division office, which is located in a small building in the Gordons neighborhood of Port Moresby, separate and apart from the main PNG Immigration and Citizenship office. When we arrived, no one was around, but after we had knocked on the door for a while, a young Australian man in business attire opened the door, let us in, and summoned an employee of the PNG Refugee Division for us to speak with. Later, we learned that this same Australian was staying next door to us at the Holiday Inn, but when we asked if he would be willing to talk to us about his work with the refugees, he said he could not speak on the subject “out of respect for the sovereignty of Papua New Guinea.”

* * *

THIS PAPER is based on a project conducted with Paige West, along with additional collaboration with Robert Bino and Ben Ruli.

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