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Australian Asylum Seeker Policy from Three Perspectives

Zoe Bell[a]

BOOK REVIEW

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HISTORY Published 2025-01-29

Shrouded in a history of colonization, xenophobia, and the desire to create a white hegemonic society, over the past two decades, Australia's immigration policy and practice relating to people who come by boat has been a complex system of deterrence, detention, and at times demonization. Since the 1970s, people seeking asylum and refugees have travelled to Australia by air and sea. Those who journey by sea through informal or unregulated means have been subject to punitive responses such as mandatory indefinite detention and deportation. Since 2001, Australia's approach to this migration stream has become increasingly robust in its militarization and punitive treatment of the asylum seeker. This approach is intended to deter boat arrivals and people using unregulated and informal means to travel to Australia. The politicalization of boat arrivals and the concern for human rights has motivated many Australian and international scholars to write on this issue, often from a socio-legal perspective.

The three books I review here consider the last decade of Australian asylum policy from different perspectives but share two common themes: (a) the Australian government's attempts to deter refugee and asylum seeker arrivals by boat by enacting violence through state policies and practices; and (b) a critique of the commodification of the asylum seeker, perpetrated by various actors but engendered, at least in significant part, by Australia's strategy of deterrence.

Antje Missbach considers the actions and motivations of Indonesian people smugglers, those who assist people to make the journey to Australia or elsewhere, comparing these to the actions and motivations of the Australian state. Julia Caroline Morris provides an anthropological account of the Nauruan perspective in receiving and housing refugees in Australian detention facilities in the

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Pacific island nation. Michelle Peterie writes about the onshore detention experience for people in immigration detention in Australia's mainland, through the eyes of the people who visit them. In this review, each book is considered individually for its unique perspective and collectively as exemplary of current scholarship related to Australia's response to refugees.

STATE ACTION PERPETRATES VIOLENCE

In the Asia-Pacific region, people seeking asylum often transit through countries such as Indonesia before travelling onwards to Australia. These and other asylum seekers may either be sent on to Nauru or detained on Australia's mainland. Australia is one of a few countries in the region that are considered part of the "Global North" and is signatory to human rights instruments, including the **Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees** (1951), thus making it appealing to people seeking refugee protection. At the same time, the Australian government uses a variety of state policies and practices to perpetrate violence intended to deter people arriving on its territory irregularly by boat, a subject that is addressed in all three works.

In **The Criminalisation of People Smuggling in Indonesia and Australia**, Antje Missbach examines Operation Sovereign Borders, a military pushback approach that includes pushing boats back into Indonesian waters, handing boats over to other navies such as Sri Lanka's, and bribing people smugglers to turn back. The Australian state turned to this violent approach after nonviolent media campaigns proved ineffective, failing to suppress the facilitation of irregular migration to Australia by smugglers. While its military strategy, by contrast, had apparent "success"—between 2015 and 2019, the numbers of maritime arrivals to Australia dropped to zero—Missbach argues that in enacting this strategy, the state is effectively acting as a smuggler and engaging in behaviour that resembles criminal activity.

In **Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru**, Julia Caroline Morris considers Australia's offshoring of refugees and people seeking asylum on Nauru, situating it in the context of Nauru's history of copra and phosphate extraction, colonial exploitation, and occupation by the Germans, British, and Japanese, which created a rise and then a fall in wealth and left the country verging on a failed state. Morris argues that Australia's offshoring policy has created a lucrative business for the Nauruan people and the government, breathing new life into the state's struggling economy.

Morris also examines another implicit deterrent to arrivals: the environmental degradation and health implications of the extraction and mining of phosphate on Nauru, contextualizing it as an example of environmental racism. In a powerful visual demonstration of the intersection of Nauru's two "primary industries," mining and "offshoring" of refugees, Morris describes refugee housing situated among an active phosphate mining site with bulldozers and piles of phosphate surrounding a single-story modular home in the "settlement zone," revealing the convergence of these industries—both of which result from the policies of nations exerting outsize power in their relations with Nauru.

In **Visiting Immigration Detention: Care and Cruelty in Australia's Asylum Seeker Prisons**, Michelle Peterie looks at onshore detention facilities in Australia. Peterie conducted research between 2015 and 2020, including 70 in-depth interviews across the country with visitors to detention who self-described as volunteers, advocates, activists, and friends. Her book considers how harm

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is enacted, who is harmed in these settings, and why harmful practices are endured and replicated in detention environments.

Peterie describes dehumanization and isolation as central harms inflicted on people in onshore detention, most of whom are seeking asylum, by Australia's policies and practices. She highlights several systemic barriers that contribute to this, including bureaucratic barriers such as complex paperwork and narrow time frames for processing applications for visitation, which limit people's ability to access detention centres and those housed within them. Other factors such as restrictions on what can be brought into the centre as food and gifts further contribute to an atmosphere of hostility.

Using the term **institutionally manufactured pain**, Peterie also describes the range of deprivations and frustrations experienced by those in detention (p. 57). One is the use of secrecy and inaccessibility through forced relocations and involuntary movement of people within the detention system. Another is disruptions to social connection and service delivery, particularly legal and health support, which Peterie describes as "tools to disrupt and disorient detainees" (p. 111). These and other policies and practices designed to manufacture pain have lasting negative impacts on detainees' physical and psychological health, exacerbated by the indefinite nature of detention.

COMMODIFICATION OF THE ASYLUM SEEKER

A second common thread between the books is their critiques of the commodification of the asylum seeker. Peterie explores the direct links between Australian policies and commodification. After describing the history of migrant detention in Australia, she examines the privatization of the detention system that allows for "profits to be derived from the racialisation, marginalisation, criminalised and ultimately commodified bodies of people of colour" (p. 31). She discusses how this privatization results in the indefinite detention of refugees, which generates a profit stream for business. This profit stream in turn contributes to the maintenance of controversial policies around detention, including privatization.

Morris suggests that in the context of Nauru, people seeking asylum are a human commodity for a range of actors. She details the changes to the country with the reintroduction of refugees in 2013, with many of the chapters describing a clash of perspectives, benefits, and threats, and gives a glimpse into the complexities of the refugee system in Nauru. Using a narrative reflection of life in Nauru, Morris describes the "uneasy relations between local residents and migrants" (p. 155) and the industry hierarchies that create social segregation and reorganize life in Nauru, rendering the locals invisible.

Providing an alternative perspective to a well-known issue of Australia's regional processing of refugees and people seeking asylum by boat, Morris gives the perspective of the Nauruan population. She describes how a welcoming culture over time turned into distrust and othering. Morris at times is perhaps overly sympathetic to the Nauruan perspective, minimizing or glossing over major instances of rape and child sexual abuse in refugee facilities and avoiding deep analysis of the government's mismanagement of funds and corruption.

Despite this flaw, Morris's consideration of historical contexts of exploitation, extraction, and colonization is well done. Her critique provides insight into the refugee regional processing system as a commodity for the Nauruan population, and the resulting social

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impact and financial dependency of the small island nation.

Missbach addresses the commodification of asylum seekers by people smugglers. She asks: Are people smugglers heroes, providing integral support to refugees fleeing persecution and enabling the basic human right to seek asylum? Or are they rightly criminalized, profiting off the misfortunes of others, endangering lives at sea, and making a mockery of the international border system? (p. 11)

Missbach draws on field observations and interviews taken over 12 non-consecutive months between 2013 and 2019 in Indonesia, as well as 143 court verdicts relating to smuggling between 2010 and 2018. The court documents provide demographic characteristics of those who engage in people smuggling in Indonesia, although Missbach suggests that these data are skewed due to the high politicization of people smuggling and irregular migration. Missbach also uses four vignettes from Indonesian people implicated or involved in people smuggling to help the reader understand the individuals involved in people smuggling and what type of "business" it is.

Missbach concludes that contrary to the notion that people smuggling is a highly lucrative, profitable, low-risk business, the Indonesian context is the reverse, seeming to be a low-profit, high-risk venture fuelled by demand, not supply. The inherent flexibility of smuggling networks, according to Missbach, means there is no need for large investment in capital and human resources. Smuggling remains low-tech but labour intensive. Although many people, particularly those most visible in the smuggling industry, have been demonized and penalized, Missbach argues that people smugglers are facilitators, allowing people to access their basic human rights to seek asylum.

EXPOSING AND RESISTING VIOLENCE

These three books consider different aspects of the Australian irregular migration deterrence policies, showcasing the voices of the people whose perspectives are often overlooked in the critique of Australia's bordering practices.

As individual contributions to forced migration discourse, these books provide useful critiques and perspectives. Missbach's book is useful to anyone focused on the refugee journey through the Asia-Pacific region, people smuggling, and Australia's deterrence strategies. Morris's book is beneficial reading for those considering the offshore detention system, the use of islands as places of detention, and colonization. Similarly, Peterie's book is of use to scholars, students, and others considering the detention system, privatization, and volunteerism.

Taken together, however, these works are something more: A powerful collection that provides an alternative narrative to that given by the Australia government and mainstream media. This corpus of works exposes state violence and commodification of asylum seekers—and by doing so, forms a means of resisting it.

Peterie makes the link between exposure and resistance clear in her work when she highlights the role of the visitor in onshore immigration detention facilities. She explores both explicit and subtle forms of resistance, with explicit forms including riots, protests, and hunger strikes, while subtle forms include finding friendships, humanity, and social justice. The visitor is integral to these subtle forms of resistance, as Peterie highlights.

In a similar way, these books are integral to resisting the violence of the Australian state. Challenging state narratives, Morris addresses the Australian state's erasure of the Nauruan community, who she suggests

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have been either written out of the discourse relating to the housing of refugees in the Pacific island nation, and therefore rendered invisible, or portrayed as savages, which maintains a colonialist perspective. Peterie makes visible the onshore detention context, which is often overshadowed in media and advocacy by concerns for refugees in offshore facilities on Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru. Missbach complicates narratives that demonize low-profit private smuggling businesses for subjecting asylum seekers to danger but laud Australian government pushback tactics that use the power of the state to intentionally perpetrate similar danger. Perhaps the greatest value of these works, therefore, lies in their collective rebuke to the Australian state and in their challenge to the narratives used to justify state violence.

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