



## Article

# Disrupting State Spaces: Asylum Seekers in Australia's Offshore Detention Centres

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**Abstract:** The Australian government has spent over a billion dollars a year on managing offshore detention (Budget 2018–2019). Central to this offshore management was the transference and mandatory detention of asylum seekers in facilities that sit outside Australia's national sovereignty, in particular on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. As a state-sanctioned spatial aberration meant to deter asylum seekers arriving by boat, offshore detention has resulted in a raft of legal and policy actions that are reshaping the modern state-centric understanding of the national space. It has raised questions of sovereignty, of moral, ethical and legal obligations, of national security and humanitarian responsibilities, and of nationalism and belonging. Using a sample of Twitter users on Manus during the closure of the Manus Island detention centre in October–November 2017, this paper examines how asylum seekers and refugees have negotiated and defined the offshore detention space and how through the use of social media they have created a profound disruption to the state discourse on offshore detention. The research is based on the premise that asylum seekers' use social media in a number of disruptive ways, including normalising the presence of asylum seekers in the larger global phenomena of migration, humanising asylum seekers in the face of global discourses of dehumanisation, ensuring visibility by confirming the conditions of detention, highlighting Australia's human rights violations and obligations, and challenging the government discourse on asylum seekers and offshore detention. Social media is both a tool and a vehicle by which asylum seekers on Manus Island could effect that disruption.

**Keywords:** seeking asylum; disruption; detention centres; social media; refugees; resistance



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Australia's policy of detaining people seeking asylum in offshore detention has attracted considerable public debate (Klocker and Dunn 2003; Pickering 2001; Chambers 2015; Bashford and Strange 2002; Dickson 2015; Mountz 2011). Of particular interest to this paper is an examination of the implications of this policy for Australia's state responsibilities and its domestic and international humanitarian obligations. Specifically, the ways in which the Australian government has offshored and outsourced state operations directed at the mobility and migration of vulnerable populations such as refugees and asylum seekers. But rather than centre the state through an examination of its legal, constitutive or human rights obligations, I propose examining this topic through the voices of those most affected by the policy, people seeking asylum who were detained in offshore detention spaces. The voices of those seeking asylum provide an important and as yet under-examined take on the Australian government's operationalisation of its offshore detention policy.

In this paper, I propose looking at this dynamic through a conceptual lens of 'disruption'. This concept of disruption has a two-pronged emphasis. Firstly, I argue that the way in which the offshore detention policy has been operationalised disrupts the normative operations of the state when it comes to seeking asylum, for example through dispersing or obfuscating areas of responsibility and accountability, governance, power and control. Secondly, I argue that asylum seekers use social media in a number of ways that are disruptive to the state discourse on seeking asylum: they use it to normalise the presence of asylum seekers in the larger global phenomena of migration, to re-humanise asylum seekers in the face of global discourses of dehumanisation, to ensure visibility by confirming

the conditions of detention and the associated expectations of Australia's human rights responsibilities, and to challenge the government discourse on asylum seekers and offshore detention. By framing this issue through a lens of disruption, I look to processes that offer discursive alternatives to the dominant and problematic narrative of the state on this issue.

This paper focuses on the more than 1000 men who were detained at the Manus Island detention centre (hereafter referred to as the Centre) between 2013 and 2017. The facility was eventually closed in November 2017 due to a ruling by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Supreme Court that declared the detention of asylum seekers in the Centre as 'unconstitutional' (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019). As a result, the Australian Government announced the Centre would close on 31 October 2017 and all those currently detained there would be moved to purpose-built accommodation near the main town on the island, Lorengau. In these facilities, they were supposedly free to move among the community while they awaited their claims to be processed. A group of up to 600 refugee men remained in the Centre after this date, undertaking a peaceful protest against their initial forced imprisonment and subsequent forced removal. The men expressed concerns for their safety, the adequacy of the new facilities and lack of essential services at Lorengau, and the uncertainty of their status in the PNG community, as well as larger claims around infringements on their human rights and the illegality of their detention (Boochani and Tofighian 2018; Doherty 2017). On November 24, it was reported that PNG mobile squad officers entered the prison and forcibly removed the remaining refugees from the facility (Doherty 2017). Most of the asylum seekers who were removed to Lorengau were eventually transferred to Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, where some were imprisoned at Bomana prison and others were transferred into the PNG community or sought resettlement in third countries (Baker 2019). While the tweets referenced in this paper make some mention of the Lorengau facility, the paper focuses on the period of time the men spent in the Manus Island detention centre, specifically an analysis of their tweets during a discrete timeframe, a 44-day period over the course of the Centre's closure in 2017. This period was chosen due to it being a high traffic episode with considerable tweeting from asylum seekers inside the Centre.

The paper first sets out the contextual setting of Australia's offshore detention policy toward asylum seekers. It then provides a discursive framework for state power and governmentality over the detention centre space, and forms of disruption to this, particularly through a lens of social media use. It presents this social media use through an analysis of asylum seeker tweets. In analysing the social media use of asylum seekers in this way, this paper intends to provide a much needed alternative framing of the asylum seeker discourse in Australia, one that centres asylum seeker agency in public policy and discourse, and seeks to normalise, legitimise and humanise the process of seeking asylum.

## 1. Australia's Offshore Detention Policy

Australia's policy of offshore detention for asylum seekers who arrive by boat is a long-standing government directive. It was originally implemented by the Howard Government in 2001 under the auspices of the 'Pacific Strategy', where anyone who attempted to arrive in Australia by boat would automatically be transferred to an offshore detention facility, most notably on the Republic of Nauru or the now-closed facility on Manus Island, PNG. Howard also introduced legislation that excised many external territories of Australia from the migration zone, making it near impossible to make a claim to asylum on Australian territory for people who arrived by boat (Vogl 2015; Foster and Pobjoy 2011). The policy of offshore detention ran until 2008 when it was dismantled by the Rudd Labor Government. Then Immigration Minister, Chris Evans described it as a "cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful exercise introduced on the eve of a Federal election by the Howard government" (SMH 2008). However, the policy was reinstated by the Gillard Labor government in 2012 and asylum seekers played a central role in the 2013 and 2016 Federal elections (Blair 2018; Muller 2017), where they were used as a political wedge in an attempt to gain electoral support.

As a state response to irregular migration, offshore detention is an expensive exercise in border control. The Australian government spent over a billion dollars on managing offshore detention in the 2018–2019 financial year (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). This constitutes a considerable economic cost, but there are also socio-political costs in terms of Australia's global standing as a humanitarian leader and the negative health and wellbeing outcomes for asylum seekers. A key driver of these socio-political costs is Australia's political and public discourse around offshore detention which has grown increasingly hostile and punitive towards asylum seekers (Klocker and Dunn 2003; Pickering 2001; Martin 2015), a position that is echoed in the global context (Heidenreich et al. 2019; Cooper et al. 2020). Through government policy, debate and marketing the Australian public are provided a clear message on the government's position on asylum seekers arriving by boat. These messages dominate mainstream media and public opinion; they are intended to be a deterrent, but also characterise the asylum seeker in terms that exceptionalise their existence, for example through narratives of dehumanisation, criminalisation, aberration and threat (Martin 2015; Suhnan et al. 2012). Successive Australian governments have prioritised offshore detention as a protective and preventative mechanism for those who seek asylum in Australia and who arrive by boat. This has been framed through mantras of "stopping the boats" and "saving lives at sea". The Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs, which is responsible for the management of offshore detention, has identified the control and protection of Australia's national borders as a key operational priority. Considerable resources have been invested in this, not necessarily with cost-effective or humane outcomes. After decades of negative political discourse, governments are prisoners to these politics, with apparently little room to move in public debate.

On the other hand, Australia is signatory to a number of protocols, for example the 1951 'Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees' and the accompanying 1967 Protocol, that seek to normalise forms of irregular migration and reinforce the existence of refugees and asylum seekers as a normative part of state sovereignty. These international conventions carry certain expectations of nation-states. Namely where states are incapable or unwilling to protect citizens, other states step in to fulfil this moral and legal responsibility. In signing these conventions, Australia has identified a standard to which it intends to operate in regards to refugees and asylum seekers. The world has long accepted the logics of migration, including refugee and asylum seeker flows, and built protocols and multi-lateral consensus that sympathetically anticipated the agency of irregular migration. But in the Australian asylum seeker debates, these messages have barely reached a mainstream audience, instead they circulate through social media and advocacy circles.

At the same time, the Australian government has also distanced itself from accountability and responsibility for what occurs within the geographies of offshore detention sites (Briskman and Mountz 2012; Vogl 2015; Mountz 2011). Paradoxically, offshore detention also degrades some nation-state power by claiming to divest control and legislative authority to other governments and corporates (Foster and Pobjoy 2011; Dickson 2015). I argue that this is a state tactic that exceptionalises the normative processes of irregular migration, freeing nation-states to pare back their humanitarian responsibilities. This positions asylum seekers as disruptive of border controls and as a threat to national sovereignty. In order to better understand the construction and implications of this dynamic, I argue for a discursive framework of disruption, incorporating state operations of power and control and asylum seeker counter narratives of resistance.

## 2. A Discursive Framework of Disruption

### 2.1. The Detention Centre

Australia's offshore detention centres are state spaces of containment and control. This serves the purposes of deterrence (controlling who arrives in Australia and how), nation-building (determining who belongs), militarisation (emphasis on national security and terrorism; restrictions on access, information), and the construction of negative rep-

representations of asylum seekers (that dehumanise, discredit and isolate). While detention has been a mainstay of Australia's migration policies, its interpretation and practice often results in racially-uneven treatment against specific groups of migrants, usually based on their point of arrival or visa status (McMaster 2001; Bashford and Strange 2002). This constitutes an 'othering', an assertion of who belongs and who does not, the 'other' deemed as a threat to the national order of things, and commonly referred to as 'queue jumper' instead of 'waiting in line', or 'ethnic other' instead of 'national brother'. This can be seen as a form of sovereign coercion, a nation-state's predilection for control, particularly in its regulation of mobility, borders and belonging. While this is a well-researched area of power (Foucault 2007; Bourdieu 1977; Scott 2009), this paper brings an additional element to these debates by overlaying the larger tenets of governance with a contextual framework of disruption, in order to better understand the linkages between the power dynamics of governments, their populations, and refugees and asylum seekers.

One way of understanding this power dynamic of control over the detention centre space is through Michel Foucault's theories of power and governmentality. A key tenet of Foucault's work on power is that it is everywhere—diffused, embodied and discursive—and that power can reside in any player, not just those who dominate, or a particular structure in which they operate (Foucault 1980). In his work on governmentality, Foucault argues that power is enacted through a wide range of control techniques, some of which can be self-disciplining rather than through a coercive government (Foucault 2007). In particular, he talks of these control techniques in the form of governing people, rather than a territory or state. Boochani and Tofighian have characterised some of these mechanisms through the concept of Manus Prison theory, which they maintain is a system of bureaucratic practices designed to have micro and macro levels of control over a population, and ultimately meant to oppress and dehumanise (Boochani 2018a, 2018b; Boochani and Tofighian 2018). I use these framings as a mechanism to examine a spatial configuration (offshore detention) as a site of discursive disruption to government power. Foucault's governmentality is applicable in its interpretation of where power lies, the relationships by which governments make subjects governable. Thus, power lies not only with the state, but with numerous practices that enable governing to occur. You could then apply Foucault's conceptualisation of power and control to understand how the political and popular discourses in Australia have attempted to normalise offshore detention, and the general acceptance among the Australian public of a government policy of deterrence and securitisation to those seeking asylum.

Moving beyond these techniques of control, disruption allows me to examine ways in which these governing structures can be disrupted and to what effect. This is a useful frame for understanding the ways in which asylum seekers also produce power in their resistances or disruption to the operations of the state. I argue that the detention centre is an example of a spatial construct where the interaction between the attributes of the detention centre space and the actions of the agents who inhabit or manage the space (in this context refugees or displaced persons), give the space meaning, often with disruptive and transformative outcomes. This is an assertion I have conceptually argued in other work where I have shown the relationship between a spatial construct that is an irregular state space ('borderlands') and the actions and constructs of agents who inhabit or manage the space (refugees, displaced persons, the state) (see Sharples 2016, 2018, 2020).

From such an assertion, it becomes important to formulate what this disruption looks like. Disruption has been used in critical geo-politics to describe a performative engagement that can reframe the dominant discourse (Williams 2014). This reframing closely aligns with the arguments I make in this paper, to examine how the dominant framing of our world, a state-based discourse of democracy and liberalism, can be disrupted, and by what means. This includes a particular emphasis on the agency of the disruptor to enact change. Disruption can of course have unsettling intentions. Anne Surma talks of "powerful acts of resistance" that convey alternative understandings of refugees and asylum seekers as human subject and agent. These depictions unsettle the "borders that the Australian

government spends so much money on trying to maintain between us . . . ” (Surma 2018, p. 523). Surma, like Williams, uses disruption as a way to challenge what is known and how it is constructed.

Disruption has also been used to convey nefarious politics related to acts of perceived extremism or political activism. In the aftermath of the Tampa crisis, the ‘disruption programme’ was a controversial Howard Government initiative that put considerable resources into deterring and disrupting people smugglers and asylum seekers from embarking for Australia (Marr and Wilkinson 2003; Faulkner 2003). In this context, disruption was used to describe acts that both attempt to dissuade the status quo (in this case the actions of people smuggler operations) and reinforce the political narrative of state sovereignty. Asylum seekers and refugees are often represented as disrupting the ‘national order of things’, through their vehicle of arrival, their claims to asylum, and their very presence testing conventional understandings of citizenship and belonging attached to a territorialised polity (Malkki 1995).

There are also often perverse and counter-intuitive elements to disruption in relation to asylum seekers. For example, the Australian state implements an offshore detention policy in order to disrupt the rights of asylum seekers. But in its operationalisation, offshore detention disrupts the State’s control over its governance. Asylum seekers use social media to disrupt the Australian Government’s discourse on asylum seekers, challenging the state’s exceptionalism of their existence and advocating a return to normalised relations between state’s and populations that move. In attempting to silence or ignore asylum seekers, the Australian Government have instead provided greater opportunities for asylum seekers to be a disruptive voice. In this context, I therefore use ‘disruption’ to capture actions that challenge the dominant narratives, norms, and structures in relation to how the state engages with and presents refugees and asylum seekers. This paper examines these notions in the context of a disruption framework, arguing that asylum seekers in Australia’s offshore detention centres can challenge such norms and constraints through their use of social media which attempts to normalise their mobility at the same time as questioning the exceptionalism placed on them by the structures and operations of the state.

## 2.2. Social Media

Asylum seeker use of social media in this modern era of offshore detention is both unique and innovative. Government restrictions on public and media access to, and reporting on Manus Island and Nauru detention centres means there is little publically available data on the experiences of asylum seekers in offshore detention nor much accountability for how the policy is implemented. This has serious democratic implications for freedom of information and communication, and freedoms of movement and assembly. We can, however, look to asylum seekers’ social media as a crucial source of information about what is occurring in these spaces. For example, through his Twitter posts, Behrouz Boochani, an asylum seeker detained on Manus Island until 2018, provided real-time documentation of the events surrounding the close-down of the Manus detention centre which is the focus of this paper. Boochani’s reporting through his Twitter account resulted in him being commissioned to provide a series of on-the-ground diary entries that were published in *The Guardian*, achieving more mainstream media cross-over of his position as both asylum seeker and journalist. In this context, Boochani’s social media enabled him to continue to practice as a journalist, where he reported from within on the conditions of the detention centre, rather than being seen solely through the state narrative as an ‘illegal’, ‘queue jumper’ or an ‘economic migrant’. In this sense, he is part of the larger global phenomena of migration, not an exception to it.

Under such circumstances, asylum seeker social media use must be deemed as a viable and credible source of information for what is occurring inside Australia’s offshore detention system (Coddington and Mountz 2014; Rae et al. 2017). Social media becomes an important vehicle to document the experiences of asylum seekers and conditions inside offshore detention centres, to advocate and press for accountability, and to connect to

journalists, advocates, parliamentarians and the Australian public more generally. It is an important tool to examine real-time understandings of the space and relations. For example, a number of asylum seekers reported on the events surrounding the closing of the Manus Island detention centre in 2017 as they were occurring, as well as the unrest that led to the death of Reza Barati in 2015. These real-time accounts provide a counter-narrative to the official narratives of such events; they also present a normalisation of the presence of asylum seekers.

There have been limited investigations into the use of social media in the post-2012 era of offshore detention. Where research does exist, it has tended to focus on how social media is used to connect asylum seekers with social support networks (Coddington and Mountz 2014; Leung 2007), how social media has been used for “self-represented witnessing”, the emphasis being on documenting experiences and interactions (Rae et al. 2017), and how technology has been used for the punitive and restrictive control and surveillance of asylum seekers by the government (Briskman 2013). Social media can suffer from the social malaise of reinforcing echo-chambers or advancing populist discourses (Davis 2019; Jakubowicz et al. 2017b), however it also has emancipatory benefits, particularly for communities typically marginalised from traditional, mainstream communication platforms (Carlson 2019). Here, social media can be a forum that connects people, disseminates information, provides support and education, and is disruptive of powerful national narratives. This paper looks at social media beyond its capacity to ‘connect’ or ‘witness’. It examines a practice that I argue already exists but has had little attention paid to it. It looks at how asylum seeker use of social media disrupts the state narrative of order and securitisation and instead intends to normalise refugees and asylum seekers as part of larger migration flows and, as such, makes them entitled to internationally-accorded rights. This is important, because disruption fosters democracy by pointing out its conflicts and failures (Staeheli 2010), and therefore highlighting where action needs to be taken. By studying disruption in Australia’s offshore detention setting, we may find more humane and democratic pathways forward in our perception and treatment of asylum seekers.

### 3. Method

This paper is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of 547 tweets during the period 24 October to 6 December 2017. This timeframe captures the closure of the Manus Island detention centre, inclusive of the culmination of a peaceful protest by asylum seekers and the destruction of property and subsequent forcible removal of asylum seekers by Australian and PNG authorities. The 547 tweets that form the dataset for this study came exclusively from four twitter handles of asylum seekers who were detained inside Manus Island detention centre during this time: @BehrouzBoochani, @MustafaGolem, @Abdulaziz\_Ada and @f\_91\_f. These four twitter handles were not the only ones tweeting during this time, however they were chosen based on frequency and quantum of posts, relevance of posts to the aims of this research, and their presence in the public domain—specifically that they were commenting publically on the conditions of the detention centre through their Twitter feeds. Within this context, the study was not intended as a representative sample of Twitter use at the time, but rather a means to examine key themes and concerns arising from the experience of being a person seeking asylum detained on Manus Island. To this end, qualitative rather than quantitative methods were utilized.

In addition, it is important to note why I have chosen to analyse this data in a way that identifies the twitter handles and tweets. Firstly, I need to acknowledge that as a white female academic I am in a privileged position to be able to collect, analyse and comment on this data, data that has been produced in and through the lived experiences of those who have endured the brutal trauma of being forcibly detained for seeking asylum. I do not speak on behalf of asylum seeker voices or for them. My position, however, does allow me to amplify these voices. I have sought to do this by framing their work in ways that emphasise asylum seeker agency and provide a critique of the operationalisation of government policy and its effect. My position in the academy gives me access to resources

and the freedom to communicate ideas and arguments, a right that was intentionally removed from the asylum seekers who were detained on Manus Island.

Despite this, asylum seeker voices penetrate the detention centre space and beyond, most pertinent through their use of Twitter. All four of the public Twitter handles are tweeters who are in the public domain and have had their tweets published across multimedia platforms; they are therefore easily identifiable. Masking their identity (through pseudonyms or anonymity) has the potential to cause harm to their intent to be a public voice. Many asylum seeker tweeters have public profiles and intend to be known and to influence public debate. Anonymisation can be harmful to this intent—disempowering or silencing the participant's voices against their will. Due to their public profiles, it may be easy to identify the tweet (even when using pseudonyms) through searching the text of the tweet. Should anonymisation be pursued, I argue that in the realm of social media it cannot be guaranteed, a position that is increasingly acknowledged in the academic literature (O'Connell 2016). However, there is a body of evidence that shows the problematic nature of unchecked use of social media users' platform data (Zimmer and Proferes 2014). These ethical considerations need to be properly recognised and weighed. In order to minimise the risks associated with these ethical concerns, I was guided by the literature of ethics in online contexts (O'Connell 2016; Townsend and Wallace 2016), to establish a set of criteria that was used to determine whether a tweeter should be identified: 1. They have a public Twitter profile (which is an open and public online location), 2. They publically identify in their Twitter profile in a professional capacity, e.g., 'Journalist' or 'Activist', 3. They have a significant following (measured by how many followers they have, and suggesting they intend to reach as wide an audience as possible). All four Twitter handles in this paper meet this set of criteria.

The tweets were collected through in situ screen grabs of the Twitter handles; this was to ensure correct visual representation of all relevant data. Given the small Twitter sample, this was also more feasible than a large data extract using a Twitter API. All Tweets were posted in English and are presented in the analysis with no amendments to the spelling and grammar they were originally tweeted in. Using a thematic analysis style and a process of inductive coding, the tweets were then read multiple times to compare patterns and clusters across the tweets. A qualitative coding framework was developed, drawing on key contextual themes such as disruption and normativity, as well as quantum across the themes, juxtapositions, and constructions of key determinants such as 'normalisation', 'deviance', 'disruptive', 'human rights entitlements' and 'governmentality'. From this thematic analysis of the tweets four important and recurring themes emerged, and were grouped as follows: Normalising asylum—human rights violations and obligations; Resistance—countering dehumanisation tactics; Controlling the narrative, disrupting the narrative, and; Who practices democracy? It is to these themes that the paper now turns.

#### **4. Normalising Asylum—Human Rights Violations and Obligations**

Australia is a signatory to a number of UN protocols that protect the rights and treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Over many decades, Australia has prided itself as 'punching above its weight' in this arena; particularly for taking a leadership role in the development and 'best-practice' implementation of these international protocols. However, the actions and policies of successive Australian governments in relation to asylum seekers, particularly over the last two decades, has effectively dismantled this reputation. To the point that Australia's decision not to sign the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, has been described as posturing for political gain, a misinformation campaign, and an attempt to appease far-right political movements (Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) 2019; Karp 2018). Although a key delegation in the design of the Compact, Australia was 1 of only 17 countries not to sign it.

There is a clear directive in the Australian government's commentary around Manus, that both seeks to absolve Australia of any responsibility or accountability for the conditions and treatment of asylum seekers on Manus, commonly manifest in evoking the national sovereign rights of PNG which has territorial authority over Manus, and to use the very existence of asylum seekers on Manus to further the political agendas of the Australian government. These debates occur in terms of national and sovereign rights and obligations but with little attention paid to how Australia measures up to its international human rights obligations. This is, of course, intended.

Asylum seekers in the Centre used their social media platforms in ways that challenged this state position. For example, during the period under analysis, asylum seekers used Twitter to document human rights violations against them as Australian and PNG authorities attempted to forcibly remove asylum seekers from the Centre and close it down. Their tweets described the denial of basic human rights such as access to food, water and healthcare; as well as deliberate acts of harm such as the destruction of water sources within the detention compound, the turning off power to the compound, and brutal attacks against asylum seekers resulting in serious injuries and medical neglect.

@f\_91\_f. 1 November. "No power No water No food They cut off all #Manus".

@BehrouzBoochani. 3 November. "You have no right to deprive humans of access to basic supplies. It's our right. Peter Dutton is doing barbaric act for own political aims."

@MustafaGolem. 4 November. "6th day of starving, my hands are shivering, stomach is empty but emotionally still strong. Waiting to hear by NZ. #Manus-CursesYouDutton"

@BehrouzBoochani. 14 November. "Manus prison camp. We have been deprived of having access to food, water, power and medication for more than 16 days."

Asylum seekers used their social media to remind the Australian state of its obligations in terms of accountability and responsibility; that they are in breach of both Australian human rights law as well as international human rights norms. A number of tweets reference the reconstitution of trauma, escaping one trauma to now be living another, and that this was a known directive issued by the Australian Government. There is also reference to the duplicitous position of a government that maintains a prominent leadership position on the UN Human Rights Council at the same time as it enacts human rights abuses against asylum seekers in detention centres.

@BehrouzBoochani. 2 November. "Australia got seat on UN human rights council & is wilfully starving people. Don't claim you're a liberal democracy. Its new kind of facism."

@BehourzBoochani. 16 November. "Australia is saying I will not take them and others cannot have them. It means they're breaking international law twice and we are officially political hostages. It's a kind of sadistic policy."

@BehrouzBoochani. 19 November. "Manus crisis result of new kind of facism & a warning to global human values. Our resistance & struggle with starvation & thirst isn't only for refugees, its for Oz & ppl of the world. We created a democratic resistance. Different ppl, nationalities, religions resisting together."

Asylum seekers use the language of rights, freedoms and protections to counter the state's actions of incarceration, isolation and dehumanisation. This represents the classic embodiment of protest and resistance, in effect an act that disrupts the dominant framing of the Australian government as a good global citizen in the liberal-democratic mode.

Taken together, these tweets normalise the presence of refugees and asylum seekers in the larger global phenomena of migration. They are a reminder of the fundamental purpose and intent of these global human rights frameworks: protection, safety, equality, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or in relation to Australia in particular, mode of arrival to seek asylum. At the same time as asylum seekers are normalising their existence and

their rights to asylum and safety from persecution, the Australian state pursues a tactic that exceptionalises this process, freeing the Australian state to pare back these responsibilities, and to position asylum seekers as disruptive of border control and as a threat to national sovereignty. This is a key tension that highlights the dueling positions of the state and asylum seekers, where the state seeks to exceptionalise what the asylum seeker seeks to normalise.

### 5. Resistance—Countering Dehumanisation Tactics

A national survey conducted in 2016 showed that Australians support humanitarian principles when it comes to helping refugees (55%), but not when it comes to asylum seekers travelling to Australia by boat, (43% agreed that boats should be turned back) (Blair et al. 2017). Research has shown that people’s evaluations and attitudes are generally less sympathetic if the group is referred to as *illegal* immigrants rather than *asylum seekers* (Augoustinos and Quinn 2003), while the Blair et al. results show that participants are less sympathetic when the group is referred to as *asylum seekers* rather than *refugees*. These semantics matter, particularly if looked at through the framework of Didier Fassin’s ‘mobilisation of compassion rather than justice’ (Fassin 2012). The refugee who comes through an officially recognised humanitarian pathway deserves compassion, though as Fassin points out not necessarily an outcome that is just. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat deserve neither our compassion or justice. In fact, the Australian government seeks to dehumanise and humiliate through punitive measures of incarceration. For example, in 2019 Australia’s Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton implied that murderers, rapists and paedophiles would more easily be able to enter Australia under the Medevac Bill (2GB 2019). Dutton was constructing the image of the asylum seeker that best suited his government’s political agenda, to present asylum seekers’ as criminals and as a threat to Australia and thereby justifying his governments’ policy of dehumanisation.

Yet the social media of asylum seekers provides a vehicle to portray the asylum seeker as human in the face of global and domestic discourses of dehumanisation. In Australia these dehumanisation discourses have constructed the asylum seeker as a deviant and a threat, lacking integrity and legitimacy, and not warranting empathy or compassion. Worryingly, we see Australia’s hard line rhetoric on asylum seekers being replicated in the global context. Dutch politician Geert Wilders has stated that Europe should copy Australia’s policy on migration and asylum seekers, and UK Home Secretary Priti Patel was reportedly considering Australia’s offshore processing model for the detention of asylum seekers arriving to the UK (Walker and Murray 2020; Murray and Matera 2020). Patel used rhetoric familiar to the Australian context, that she would “stop the boats” from crossing the Channel.

However, a process of humanising people seeking asylum can act as a counter to these discourses of dehumanisation, and often occur with both compassion and justice in mind. The body is a common reference in the tweets analysed, from the embodiment of bare senses—‘thirst’, ‘hunger’ and ‘nakedness’—to the active status of the body such as ‘waiting’, ‘watching’ and ‘silence’. These tweets convey the incredibly vulnerable positioning of the men on Manus—with references to being scared, exhausted, weak, broken and anxious. They also appeal to shared human emotions—humiliation, despair, fear, anger, powerlessness, desire, or denial of. There are also larger references to being human, to being entitled to safety, dignity and respect, and to being subjected to inhumane cruelty.

@f\_91\_f. 9 November. “They brought us to #Manus by force and they want to resettle us by force We didn’t come to PNG. We even don’t know PNG Used us by Australian Politicians Let us go somewhere safe. We are human like everyone #Manus #ManusIsland #ManusSOS”.

@MustafaGolem. 24 November. “First they break you with hunger and thirst and then beat you to death. And at the end abandon.”

@Abdulaziz\_ada. 1 December. "While you are keeping people in prison you must feed them. You cannot humiliate people by denying basics like food or water. What do you want from us? Let us go, we are human beings and need safety, dignity, freedom. We don't need your food."

Attached to these representations are frequent appeals for help and support, often cached in terms that appeal to a sense of shared humanity and compassion. This is in direct contrast to what Peterie has argued are Australian government discourses which deliberately cast doubt on asylum seekers worthiness for compassion by denying their "suffering, innocence and similarity to 'us'" (Peterie 2017, p. 362).

@f\_91\_f. 3 November. "I just wonder The whole world cannot hold 600 people????? Don't we deserve a freedom? A safe life??? #Manus".

@BehrouzBoochani. November 8. "Hundreds of hungry, half-naked, powerless men are asking people around the world to support them. Manus prison camp is so scary at this moment."

I argue that these tweets constitute a form of disruption to state discourses that attempt to convey the asylum seekers in terms that question their value and authenticity as well as their right to be considered human, incorporating both subject and agency. Here, I return to the work of Anne Surma to argue these tweets are acts of resistance that challenge the conventional understanding of refugees and asylum seekers, giving a sense of political agency to the human subject. In this way, we can come to understand asylum seekers in the larger framing of a common humanity, a lived everyday experience of suffering that can have a shared resolution.

## 6. Controlling the Narrative, Disrupting the Narrative

The Australian government has gone to considerable lengths to control the narrative on offshore detention. At times, they have done this with great success. The vast majority of Australians support boat turn backs and are comfortable with a hardline offshore detention policy (Blair et al. 2017; Markus 2019). At other times there has been an air of desperation, for example for a period of time in 2013 and ending in January 2014, the Government attempted to control the public commentary on boat arrivals by providing spoon-fed information via weekly briefings conducted by the then Immigration Minister Scott Morrison. The government refused to comment on the issue outside of these briefings.

The social media of asylum seekers is therefore an essential and effective countering tool to the government's attempt to control the narrative on asylum seekers and offshore detention. This point is recognised by the Government, who have variously over the years attempted to deny asylum seekers access to mobile phones; from introducing legislation to ban mobile phones in detention centres to perpetuating stories of asylum seeker use of mobile phones for criminal activity. The most recent attempt, in 2020, saw the Liberal Government introduce the Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill that would prohibit mobile phones and other internet capable devices from immigration detention centres, and grant staff powers to search detainees without a warrant (Peterie 2020). Mobile phones have been shown to be powerful tools for self-representation and reporting (Rae et al. 2017), as a means to connect asylum seekers to service providers and support networks (Leung 2007), and to mitigate marginalisation and isolation (Coddington and Mountz 2014). While obviously not applicable to the sovereign jurisdictions of Nauru and Manus Island, the Australian government's attempts to legislate against mobile phone use in onshore detention centres highlights their perceived importance. In the context of the Manus Island detention centre, asylum seeker Behrouz Boochani has documented how mobile phones are a lifeline for those detained and how authorities have tried to remove them as a form of punishment or provide access as a form of control (Boochani 2018a).

Asylum seeker social media often takes the form of a witnessing, and in some cases a more methodical documenting, that affords an alternative narrative to the one broadcast by

the Australian Government. Due to government restrictions on media and public access to the Centre in 2017, asylum seekers' social media was the only credible source of information coming out of the Manus Island detention centre. This took various forms. For example, in 2017 the PNG and Australian governments announced the Manus Island detention centre would be closed, and that asylum seekers would be moved to a transit centre in Lorengau. These accommodation facilities were purpose built and would house the refugees while they waited for their claims to be processed. A number of asylum seekers, through Twitter, provided pictures that directly contradicted that narrative. They showed construction vehicles still working at the West Lorengau centre which was not yet finished nor habitable, despite the Australian Government insisting it was.

@BehrouzBoochani. 8 November. "The refugees who already left RPC for Hillside are in harsh conditions, imprisoned in their rooms. Hillside is a real prison worse than RPC."

@BehrouzBoochani. 1 December. "People in new prison camps Hillside & West Haus living with a lack of food, water, electricity. They put so many people in a place that's not ready. The system is sadistic, after 4.5yrs in prison still treats people with contempt. #Manus"

Another example is the way asylum seekers were able to use social media to document how authorities entered the Centre and destroyed belongings, medicines and infrastructure, attacked and beat asylum seekers with sticks and metal rods, and forcibly removed the asylum seekers to the Lorengau Transit Centre. The Australian Government called it 'a voluntary and peaceful transfer' of the population, but the accounts provided via asylum seekers social media showed a different version of events. They documented the destruction of shelters, water tanks, beds and other belongings. They documented injuries caused by authorities attacking the asylum seekers. They showed how asylum seekers practicing peaceful protest were arrested and detained. They showed how threats, intimidation and violence were used to instill fear and compliance.

@MustafaGolem. 10 November. "Police is inside the compound and wasting our water and everything we made for survive. Shame shame Australia shame."

@BehrouzBoocani. 13 November. "Fifteen days without food, power and water. I don't know how to describe this disaster, it is created by Australia and will be in your history."

@BehrouzBoochani. 22 November. "They are destroying everything. Shelters, tanks, beds and all of our belongings. They are very aggressive and put our belongings in the rubbish bins. The refugees still are silent are watching them so scared."

@f\_91\_f. 23 November. Everyone is stress and worrying about what happened today. Peter Dutton said we don't want to use violence so what about destroyed everything. Forced some of us #Manus swore at us. #Manus #ManusIsland #ManusSOS #auspol #EvacuateManus #SOSManus".

While these constitute counter narratives to specific events, an analysis of asylum seeker social media use also sheds light on disruption that occurs at a broader level. Here I am thinking of the way these alternative narratives shed light on acts of the state that go against their stated democratic and liberal ideals, and their international humanitarian obligations. These counter narratives not only disrupt the state narrative, but importantly, can become a mechanism for holding states to account for their actions towards refugees and asylum seeker.

## 7. Who Practices Democracy?

The era of offshore detention as a policy can be seen as a steady decline in Australia's democratic credentials. Australia's migration policy has become increasingly militarised with a heavy emphasis on policing the border and prioritising national security, forcing asylum seekers into a purposefully liminal state of existence where their treatment and

rights become obfuscated. For example, the Australian government has repeatedly denied responsibility for what occurred on Manus Island, shifting responsibility to the sovereign territorial rights of Papua New Guinea. This is despite clear and authoritative directives from the Australia government in the “establishment, use, operation and provision of total funding for the centre [that] clearly satisfies the test of effective control in international law . . . ” (The Senate 2014).

This decline can be seen as a sort of ‘shady nationalism’, both in the sense of dubious acts of state that are occurring in the shadows, for example the exorbitant costs and claims of corruption attached to the tender process for external service providers to the centre, and the murky nature of the state’s nationalist agenda toward asylum seekers, applying a form of racialized migration and citizenship to seeking asylum (Sharples and Briskman forthcoming). In the process, the state disrupts its own national sovereignty through the creation of exclaves (offshore detention centres) that defy traditional understandings of the moral, political and legal responsibilities of the sovereign nation (Coddington and Mountz 2014), and pushes sovereignty and external scrutiny further offshore and out of sight (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019).

In many ways, asylum seekers are holding a mirror up to Australian society, reflecting back the moral and ethical decline willingly created. But there is generosity in the way they do this, a warning that what has started as a moral decline directed at the ‘other’, the asylum seeker, is but a micro-step away from being directed at Australian society more broadly. In his essay, *Manus Prison Theory*, Behrouz Boochani (2018c) explicitly warns of this:

The soul of Manus Prison and the system that created and governs Manus Prison is in the process of replicating itself throughout Australian society, reproducing itself in unlimited numbers. This is the merciless system that takes humans captives and subjects them to rules and regulations of micro-control and macro-control, a system that takes their human identities.

Boochani’s writing is a warning against the creep of oppression, and where this might end for an Australian population that thinks itself removed from the effect of such practices. This sentiment is echoed in a number of tweets that made repeated references to Australian government practices in offshore detention being ‘facist’, or in its implementation a continuation of ‘colonial thinking’. Both accusations are a sharp observation on Australia’s standing as a leader of democracy. This can be seen as a generalised warning to Australians to be more critical of the acts that are occurring on their watch and to be aware of how these practices impede into their own lives.

While the state’s democratic credentials can be seen as questionable, during the closure of the Manus Island detention centre asylum seekers undertook a range of actions that one would normally equate with the values of a ‘good citizen’. Many tweets documented community spirit such as regularly checking in on those around you and advocating for the sick and ill. Other democratic attributes could be found in equality of voice achieved through a voting system that allocated decisions and actions to be put into practice during the asylum seekers peaceful protest; freedom of movement, where asylum seekers were free to leave the compound and go to Lorengau centre should they choose to; and fierce resistance to authoritarian practices through silent and peaceful protest. These practices were extended to the protection and care for a number of animals in the compound, and awareness of the impacts of the detention regime on the local Manusian community. One could easily argue that asylum seekers were exhibiting the shared principles of humanity, community and democracy in action.

@BehrouzBoochani. 3 November. “The silent peaceful protest has started in Manus prison camp. We won’t stop protesting because of starvation. Determined to resist.”

@BehrouzBoochani. 6 November. “The reason refugees don’t want to leave is not because of encouragement. Its because freedom and safety are our right.”

@f\_91\_f. 8 November. "100 days of peaceful protest 8 days without water. Food. Power and medical care 6 deaths Attacks Treatment badly #Manus #ManusSOS".

@Abdulaziz\_ada. 2 December. "We will never give up fighting for our freedom till we get to a safe country. They brought us here by force and we're illegal in this country".

A number of tweets made claims around fundamental rights such as freedom to assemble and freedom of speech. They advocated for the right to be safe and to have choices.

@Abdulaziz\_ada. 6 December. "In democratic countries there s freedom of speech and I believe Australia is one of those. Peaceful protests is not against the law or neither speaking during the protest. Your humanity, dignity and respect will represent who you are, three elements it can't be sell. #Manus"

While these capture universal human rights norms, they are also some of the cornerstones of democratic governance, though hotly disputed in the Australian context where political and popular debate around these issues is contested (Jakubowicz et al. 2017a). Regardless of their interpretation, they do represent a norm in the application of Australian human rights frameworks and an ideal by which those seeking asylum could expect a standard to be met. It would seem reasonable then to argue that asylum seekers embody many of the democratic ideals the Australian government declares its allegiance to, and this is one of many missed opportunities for Australia.

## 8. Conclusions

Asylum seeker and refugee flows are global preoccupations. Many countries, whether source, transit or receiving countries, are grappling with best practices and domestic and global responsibilities towards those seeking refuge or asylum. This is a global problem that requires global decision-making and collaboration. Current debates around asylum seekers in Australia are framed by anti-asylum seeker sentiment. They receive bipartisan political support and popular public approval. A large proportion of the Australian population is shown to be antipathetic to the human rights of asylum seekers (Blair et al. 2017) and this is reinforced through popular media and government policy and rhetoric. But Australia's treatment of asylum seekers also poses a challenge to its democratic and humanitarian ideals. This paper highlights the importance of interventions into these debates then that are based on Australia's human rights obligations, that emphasises the normalisation of refugee and asylum seeker migration flows, and in particular, that prioritise the voices and experiences of asylum seekers.

An analysis of recurring themes in the 547 tweets in this study finds a common thread of disruption to state discourses on asylum seekers. While the state consolidates or enforces control over the spatial and temporal arrangements of the offshore detention centre, asylum seekers use social media to disrupt it. They do this in a number of ways. Asylum seekers disrupt the dominant narratives, norms, structures and practices of the state through an alternative positioning of the asylum seeker as human subject and agent. These disruptions, enacted through asylum seeker's social media, normalise the mobility of asylum seekers and refugees in the larger global framework of migration, and reinforces asylum seeker claims to international human rights norms and protections—to be seen and treated with humanity. This acts as a form of resistance to the exceptionalism placed upon them by the structures and operations of the state, which seeks, through a range of coercive control mechanisms to oppress and dehumanise the asylum seeker. In this context, the efficacy of social media as a disruptive tool to state discourses seems evident. The Government's continued attempts to restrict access and use of mobile phones in detention centres suggests they are also concerned about its power. However, whether asylum seeker social media use has the capacity to impact policy or public opinion change is still uncertain. A more thorough examination of the reach and impact of social media use would therefore be a worthy direction for future research.

In providing a unique insight into the operationalisation of offshore detention centres, particularly highlighting the insights of the asylum seekers themselves, this paper has sought to disrupt the long-standing problematic discourse inherent in Australia government policy on asylum seekers. It is hoped this offers an opportunity to develop more humane, more democratic pathways forward in our treatment and obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers, and provide an alternative framing of the asylum seeker discourse in Australia, one that seeks to normalise, legitimise and humanise the process of seeking asylum.

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