

INTRODUCING ISLAND DETENTIONS

The placement of asylum seekers and migrants on islands

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Introduction

This special issue is a collaborative endeavour undertaken by editors and authors. It arose as a response to a growing trend: the detention of migrants and asylum seekers on islands (Mountz, 2011). Historically, islands have long served as prisons, whether expansive penal colonies for colonial powers as Australia was to the United Kingdom, or smaller, more proximate, high-security sites for prisoners as Alcatraz was to San Francisco on the western coast of the United States. Scholars have attempted exhaustive lists of island prisons (cf Taussing, 2004). These lists are long because of the geography of the island, itself imagined as an isolated place. Of course, islands are far from isolated but the geographical imagination of nation-states holds them as a sort of punitive stage. Indeed, writing about Lampedusa, Paolo Cuttitta (2011) suggests that a kind of 'border play' transpires on the island, a stage where debates about national immigration policies and politics are performed.

In a broader context, islands have been used to contain those unwanted or seen to threaten mainstream society, including political prisoners and 'enemy aliens' during periods of war, people suffering from leprosy, and indigenous populations. Jude McCulloch argues that the island is a well-used metaphor for prison:

The geography of the island, cut off from the mainland and by implication the mainstream of life, captures the radical separation of prisoners and prisons from outside society. The metaphorical use of island may also point back to history when literal islands were more frequently used to exclude, isolate and imprison the ill, the insane and those reproduced as criminals in societies divided along 'race', class and gender. (McCulloch, 2007: 3-4)

There are many reasons why islands are emerging today as 'hot spots' where conflicts over whether migrants and asylum seekers will be excluded from or allowed to enter sovereign territory unfold. Far from isolated, the very geography of islands means that

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migrants travelling by boat often land on islands as the furthest and closest bit of sovereign territory that they can reach once they leave home. To use the examples discussed in this special issue, Christmas Island is close to Indonesia, Lampedusa to Tunisia and Guam to Asia. Human smugglers often direct ships to these islands and enforcement authorities often tow migrants intercepted at sea to these islands.

Once migrants reach islands, the stage is set for power struggles to ensue. Islands often have 'grey' political statuses; they may be part of sovereign territory administratively, yet different for the purposes of migration. Christmas Island, for example, is an Indian Ocean Territory of Australia but a location where asylum seekers have faced more restricted access to asylum in Australia in recent years (cf Briskman, Latham and Goddard, 2008). Similarly, Guam and Saipan are both part of the US administratively but hold distinct political status and therefore distinct immigration policies from one another (see Coddington et al, this issue). Still other islands where migrants are detained are independent nation-states. Here, Nauru and Indonesia are cases in point. Although Australian mainland territory is the draw for many migrants detained in Nauru and Indonesia, and Australia funds the detention in Nauru and Indonesia, they are not in any way part of Australian sovereign territory or immigration policies for the purposes of law, administration, and access. In this sense, national borders have become increasingly detached from sovereign territory as the late modern state "expresses its power to control entry both within and beyond its territorial limits" (Weber and Pickering, 2011: 11).

The complex political statuses of islands create complicated legal statuses for migrants detained on them (Mountz, 2011). They may be en route to make asylum claims but are unable to do so once detained on islands. Or, they may be able to make asylum claims on islands but face more restricted access to the asylum claimant system. For all of these reasons, migrants and asylum seekers themselves enter into uncertain circumstances with precarious dimensions. Their legal status is unclear. Their economic livelihoods and those of their families at home are on hold. They face prolonged periods of uncertainty as they may be on islands for days or years to come.

The political contexts, management and built infrastructure of detention vary greatly across the many islands where migrants and asylum seekers find themselves detained. In some cases, populations are allowed to come and go from 'open' facilities but are not allowed to work or leave the island. In other cases, these are high security facilities, extraordinarily expensive to build, guard, and maintain. Often, islands have histories of geostrategic roles in war and therefore have military bases (cf Vine, 2009) that become repurposed to process and hold migrant detainees. This is the case on Italy's Lampedusa and on Malta, to provide two examples.

Islands are not isolated or wholly distinct from mainland landscapes of detention. Indeed, they are an expression of the larger phenomenon of growth in detention. This trend is particularly pronounced in Australia and the United States (the home countries of the two guest editors of this issue) but also notable in the UK and across the European Union. These locations prove desirable draws as destinations for potential immigrants and asylum seekers for the promise of protection and employment they hold. To counter this draw, detention landscapes are intensifying in the transit regions surrounding destination areas: in Mexico, Canada, Indonesia, northern Africa and Eastern Europe.

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Because they are far removed from national and transnational publics, migrants detained on islands may be in more precarious situations there. They will face fewer avenues to legal representation and other forms of advocacy. States often attempt to hide enforcement practices at sea and on islands from the purview of national and international publics. As a result, detention facilities on islands often have histories of denied entry to politicians, human rights monitors and journalists; as though events, populations, and human rights abuses that transpire on islands can be hidden. This was especially true on Lampedusa. Even though other sites, such as in Australia, have monitoring occurring, this is limited by distance and resources and the fact that Australia has not implemented the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, which would create independent monitoring systems.

Even when it has seemed at times that island detentions would be shut down due to international pressure and public protest, they seem to recur, reopen or crop up on other islands. As we write, Australia has re-opened two previously mothballed detention sites on the island nation-state of Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. This movement of human smuggling and detainee populations across the carceral archipelago often reflects the symbiotic relationship between border enforcement and human smuggling (Nadig, 2002). Along the dynamic southern frontier of the European Union, for example, smuggling routes have changed in response to intensified, collaborative policing coordinated by Frontex (the European Union's border management body). Smuggling routes once went to the Canary Islands and then moved east to Lampedusa, then Malta, with current pressure great in Greece and Turkey.

Holding people on islands makes them more difficult to access, more detached from advocates, activists, attorneys and the very infrastructure of asylum that one finds on mainland territory (especially in large cities). Damage arising from these rights-exclusions results in immeasurable harms to wellbeing, including the mental health of children and adults. At the unaccountable border, nation-states can exercise their power with impunity and brutality. In these sites of exclusion, liberty is denied and normative state rights minimised. Identity is discounted and the demonised, criminalised asylum seeker is uncritically perceived by those far away from the island in the nation's heartland as a threat to the nation, creating panic and fear. Political and media narratives pay scant attention to the situation from which people are fleeing, instead emphasising the lure of their countries to the migrants and asylum seekers that it is necessary to halt.

Broader immigration politics suggest that islands serve an external function of scripting 'others' to national populations. Often they are held far away on rationales of fear and narratives of security risk or threat to national security, fears that increased after the events of 9/11. Exclusions from the nation-state are fundamentally 'raced' as the concept of race is central to the articulation of the modern nation-state (Stratton, 2009). What does the use of islands as sites of detention tell us about the dominant construction of those 'othered' in dominant discourses? First, it signals a concept of territory that is premised on nationalism, ethnicity (usually 'white') and religion (usually Christian). Second, it signifies a position whereby it is the prerogative of the receiving state to extend welcome, which results in the shunning of the uninvited. If deterrence strategies do not work, then banishment to islands is often the next preferred option. The construction of host and guest implies that those fleeing their countries of origin to seek safe haven have rational choices. Third, the use of islands for detention reinforces the notion of 'orderly migration' when in fact forced migration is chaotic, unpredictable

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and uncontrollable. Dominant communities become convinced that those selected for admission should meet the needs of the nation-state in terms of wealth, skill, ethnicity and religion and that the government should be empowered to fulfil this duty. With the backing of powerful public relations machinery and the support of voracious media, separation of those on the inside from those on the outside occurs with ease and islands are ideal sites for this to transpire.

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While each essay in this special issue explores distinct sites and themes, a number of key issues cut across the contributions. First among these is the issue of psychological impact on detainees themselves. Second is the issue of the economic impact of detention on island communities. Third is the role that islands play in broader national immigration and asylum seeker policies and systems of detention and deportation. Fourth is the manner in which human rights are forfeited in the interests of increasingly tightened border control measures. International human rights bodies have critiqued immigration detention facilities for breaches of obligations of nations to the 'Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees' (1951). Within broader landscapes, islands may play a punitive role or a means to exclude and chip away at access to sovereign territory and the rights that accrue once a person lands there.

The articles in this edition offer a snapshot of immigration detention in island settings. Although it is not possible to be globally exhaustive, the case studies that appear illustrate the common themes that emerge in nation-building projects that privilege controlled migration. Each of the contributors has explored specific island detention sites, one or several, and each has selected key issues to interrogate. The articles illuminate the quest by nation states to banish those who are rejected by the mainstream of society. Despite the different regions of the world in which the practices occur, they signal a contemporary narrative of rejection of migrants and refugees. Furthermore, as the article by Nethery explains, islands play a powerful and evocative role in the governance and imagination of the nation state.

The first article by Kate Coddington, Tina Catania, Jenna Loyd, Emily Mitchell-Eaton and Alison Mountz employs a framework of embodied epistemologies to extend Hannah Arendt's insights (1958) by applying them to collaborative case studies, namely Guam and Northern Marianas Islands, Lampedusa and Christmas Island. The article is derived from team research by geographers working together on the island detention project to explore how islands become sites of struggle over migration, entry, exclusion, detention and migration management. The authors are especially concerned with the kinds of resistance to detention as a form of migration management on islands. The article sets the scene for those that follow through its theoretical underpinnings and its comparative approach.

The article that follows by Azadeh Dastyari and Libby Effeney exposes a little-known aspect of US detention on Guantánamo Bay. With the global focus in the past decade on the War on Terror facility, the Migrants Operations Centre which has been operating since 1991 remains hidden from the public domain, as is the case with other examples in this edition of the out-of-sight/out-of-mind locations of island detention sites. We are also introduced to the specific plight of Haitians. The authors offer an historical journal of US/Cuban relations, including the reluctance of the US to leave Guantanamo Bay.

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The article by Heidrun Friese focuses on the Italian island of Lampedusa (introduced in the first article by Coddington et al). Friese bases her analysis on long-term and multi-sited anthropological fieldwork in Lampedusa and Tunisia. Like the example of Christmas Island that follows in later articles, Lampedusa has been subjected to intense media coverage. The article demonstrates a trajectory of responses by islanders and others to migrants that began informally and with welcome from locals and that grew increasingly hostile. This trajectory is not isolated to Lampedusa, and can be found on Christmas Island as well. Friese clearly and importantly illustrates the limits of hospitality and the nascent migration industry on islands as part of the border regime.

The final three articles address the Australian context; yet offer global themes that resonate with island detentions in other regions. Australia is an interesting case study as it is an island nation that began its postcolonial life as an island prison to accommodate those sent by boat from overcrowded prisons of 'Mother Country' England. The first in this Australian sequence by Amy Nethery draws back from immigration detention to present historical understandings of how islands have evolved as sites of incarceration. By tracing this historical context, Nethery provides four examples that preceded asylum seeker detention, namely secondary punishment of convicts on Norfolk Island, management and quarantine of Indigenous people on Palm Island, quarantine of new migrants and visitors on Bruny Island, and the incarceration of 'enemy aliens' on Rottneest Island. What emerges is a pattern of the use of islands to confine, contain, segregate, and control specific groups of people. There, specific temporal and social anxieties - for which the Australian government's solution was always incarceration - can be identified.

Despite its vast distance from the Australian mainland, asylum seeker detention on Christmas Island has been subject to intense media and advocate scrutiny, even though the island is rarely visited. The article by Linda Briskman, Lucy Fiske and Michelle Dimasi extends the introduction to this island in the first article and focuses on the reaction of Islanders, using a sample of their direct voices wherever possible. Based on interviews and ethnographic observation, the article examines how critical events, more often postulated as crises, influence the shifting ground of attitudes within this close-knit community. A different notion of 'threat' to that advanced by nation-states emerges and brings to the fore not border or health concerns, but the intrusion on island life and the lack of local say in island destiny.

The final article by Peter Chambers directs further historical gaze on Christmas Island, this time from the perspective of neo-colonial island residents tasked with bureaucratic management of the island when it was dedicated primarily to the business of phosphate mining. Chambers connects two snapshots in the life of Christmas Island drawn from its neo-colonial past and neo-colonial present. The former explores the perspective of the island manager; the latter explores the present practice of segregation of asylum seekers on the island.

This special issue of *Shima* offers the first (to our knowledge) sustained study of detention practices on islands. Collectively, the authors explore a range of pressing issues in places where sovereignty is contested as contemporary migration management regimes take hold. Far from remote or removed, island detentions prove central to contemporary debates about human migration, citizenship, and the geography of sovereignty.

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