

EDITED BY

RACHEL SHARPLES  
LINDA BRISKMAN

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DETAIN

DEHUMANISE

THE POLITICS OF  
SEEKING ASYLUM

**Deter, Detain, Dehumanise**

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# **Deter, Detain, Dehumanise: The Politics of Seeking Asylum**

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To those who have spoken out, to those who have been silenced, and to those who have lost their lives under punitive and de-humanising policies and practices.*

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## About the Editors

**Rachel Sharples** is Lecturer in Sociology at Western Sydney University. She is the author of *Spaces of Solidarity* (Berghahn Books, 2020). She has written for *The Conversation* and the *Forced Migration Review*. She has published chapters in *Contemporary Perspectives on Human Rights Law in Australia* (Thomas Reuters, 2020), *The Modern Guide to the Urban Sharing Economy* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021) and the *Handbook of Migration and Global Justice* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021). She has received an Early Career Research Award for her research and writing and along with Linda Briskman convened the Politicisation of Seeking Asylum symposium in October 2020 which drew more than 500 attendees from across the globe.

**Linda Briskman** holds the Margaret Whitlam Chair of Social Work at Western Sydney University. She is co-author of the award-winning book *Human Rights Overboard* (Scribe, 2008). She has published more than 10 books, including the co-authored *Human Rights and Social Work* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), the co-edited *Indigenous Health Ethics: An Appeal to Human Rights* (World Scientific, 2021), the co-edited *Social Work in the Shadow of the Law* (Federation Press, 2018) and *Social Work with Indigenous Communities: A Human Rights Approach* (Federation Press, 2014). She has authored more than 100 academic publications on human rights issues and published in *Arena*, *The Conversation* and written opinion pieces in ABC's *The Drum*, as well as for international media outlets. She has won awards for her writing, research and advocacy.

## About the Contributors

**Hani Abdile** is a writer and spoken word poet based in the country of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, in Sydney. She was forced to leave her home country of Somalia and came to Australia seeking protection in 2014. During her 11 months in immigration detention, she found healing in poetry and developed a love for writing. Her first book of 43 poems, *I Will Rise*, was published by Writing Through Fences in 2016 and explores how the power of our collective voices can help shape the world to be a better place, for the next generation.

**Barat Ali Batoor** is a multi-award-winning photographer and filmmaker. His photographs were exhibited across the world including the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia. His works have been published in *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *Stern*, *India Today*, *Risk Magazine*, *The Global Mail*, *The Daily Mail*, *The West Australian*, *Strategic Review* and others. His documentary film *Batoor: A Refugee Journey* won an award for the 'Best Director' at the Melbourne Documentary Film Festival. The film was also nominated for the 2021 Walkley Documentary Award.

**Behrouz Boochani** is a Kurdish-Iranian writer, journalist, scholar, cultural advocate and filmmaker. His book, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* won the 2019 Victorian Prize for Literature. He has also won the Special Award at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Australian Book Industry Award for Nonfiction Book of the Year and the National Biography Prize. It has been published in 19 languages in 24 countries and is currently being adapted for both stage and screen. His most recent book is *Freedom, Only Freedom*. He was a political prisoner incarcerated by the Australian government in Papua New Guinea for almost seven years. In November 2019, he escaped to New Zealand and now resides in Wellington.

**Kate Coddington** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University at Albany. She is a feminist political geographer whose research examines how the experiences of increasing numbers of forced migrants who fall outside the protections of asylum law illuminate changing dimensions of border enforcement, mobility and sovereignty. Current research involves exploring the role of public information campaigns in border enforcement, the gaps in refugee governance in the Asia-Pacific region and the role of impoverishment and destitution in migration control policies.

**Michelle Jasmin Dimasi** is an Australian anthropologist and writer focussed on refugees, migration and Afghanistan. She is the author of *Hope, Solidarity and Death at the Australian Border* with the foreword by UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Khaled Hosseini (The Kite Runner) and all book royalties going to The Khaled Hosseini Foundation to help Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. She has written for ABC News, *Newlines Magazine*, *Inside Story* and the *Canberra Times*. Today, she lives between Dubai and Kabul and previously resided in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and on Christmas Island.

**Claire Loughnan** is a Lecturer in Criminology, at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne. Her research interests are in border protection, immigration detention and the modes, practices and effects of spaces of confinement and control.

**Julie Macken** is an Adjunct Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University. She completed her PhD into the question surrounding Australia's abuse of those who came seeking the state's protection. She has worked as a Documentary Film Writer and Senior Writer with the *Australian Financial Review*; worked as Political and Media Consultant to Federal Labor and NSW Greens and has worked in media for Greenpeace and ActionAid. Her research focussed on the psycho-analytic drivers of Australia's abuse.

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**Bosco Opi** currently works for the University of South Australia in the Research Office. Prior to that, he worked for the Australian Department of Home Affairs on border protection for about a decade. He holds a PhD in Migration and Refugee Law from Flinders University, Faculty of Business, Government, and Law. His PhD thesis provides a decolonial critique of 'prolonged' refugee encampment in Kenya and Africa by extension. He is a decolonial scholar and the author of 'Borders Recolonised – The Impacts of the EU Externalisation Policy in Africa' (2021) published in the *Journal of Decolonial Discipline*.

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**Anthea Vogl** is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Law. Her research addresses refugee and immigration law, and racialised forms of regulation of non-citizens and the border. She is currently co-leading an Australian Research Council Discovery Project examining the privatisation of refugee reception and resettlement and she is the author of *Judging Refugees: Narrative and Oral Testimony in Refugee Status Determination* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

# Foreword

Let's start with this image: two tiny islands in the middle of a huge ocean and much further away, another big island, a continent. People who escaped persecution, discrimination and war sought asylum in the big island. But they got rejected and were banished to the tiny islands and jailed there. Politicians in the big island thought that by banishing them, they would be out of sight and out of mind. But years later, refugees in the small islands challenged the big island – mostly through art, writing and collective resistance like hunger strikes and protests which have become visible on public platforms. This is just an abstract of Australia's policy towards refugees in recent years and how refugees challenge it through narrating.

Refugees in Manus Island and Nauru have not only resisted in order to survive but built a knowledge of resistance or 'resistance knowledge'. This knowledge is the way refugees exist, resist and introduce themselves into the world. The knowledge of how refugees have resisted oppressive powers is a good way to analyse and understand Australian politics and society.

It is crucial that when we talk about these refugees, we recognise that they have distanced themselves from simply being victims of cruel refugee policies. Beyond being in a position of bearing witness to and experiencing cruelty, they have also created their own discourse and this is the main part of this resistance knowledge. When I talk of resistance knowledge, I don't just mean refugees, but also those people in and out of Australia who have been standing up for refugee rights and working with refugees, and who are also part of this discourse.

It is a collective resistance and collaboration to introduce a unique and radical perspective towards politics and Australia's political culture. It is an epidemiology of people who have been dehumanised for decades in the public and the prison camps.

Refugees in Australia's detention system have not only exposed the cruelty of this regime but have challenged the dehumanisation process and the idea that refugees are less than other people. Dehumanisation is the most important concept in this context that we should know and be aware of, because only through the process of dehumanisation is it possible to create such a tragedy. Dehumanisation begins in the context of language and fighting against this process still happens in the context of language. Refugees are first criminalised in language. They are introduced as a threat against national security in language first so that it's easier to normalise keeping people in indefinite detention and exile them, while the public accepts it. The concept of 'boat people', 'illegal refugees' and 'offshore processing centre' are keywords entered into the popular language to justify or



normalise Australia's detention system. The established media have also used words like 'rapists', 'drug dealers' and 'potential terrorists' to describe refugees. The refugees in Australia have challenged this language and created their own.

This book is another attempt to challenge this prejudiced language. It tries to understand the differing aspects of Australia's detention system and expose the different layers of it. To understand this system, we need an inter-disciplinary approach, because Manus and Nauru happened in the context of Australia's colonial mentality. In other words, we can say it is the unconscious side of Australia. This book is not only academic but is also a part of collective collaboration and collective resistance knowledge. This is a critical piece of work to analyse the Australian detention industry and expose different layers of it, but at the same time, decolonise the language and narrative about refugees to create a fundamental change.

**Behrouz Boochani**

# Acknowledgements

The idea of this book started with a symposium we organised in October 2020, *The Politicisation of Seeking Asylum: Manus Prison Theory and Australia's Response to Asylum Seekers*. We were looking for a way to build on a significant body of work that already existed around Australia's offshore detention practices and its treatment of asylum seekers. We decided on the broad theme of the politicisation of seeking asylum, because it spoke to the very deliberate and calculated approach governments have taken towards those seeking asylum, not only here in Australia but globally. We believe this issue is a multi-faceted one, that it does, and will, require a multi-pronged approach, and so we brought together speakers from a range of disciplines: political science, geography, law, sociology, social work, criminology, who often work in interdisciplinary ways, to bring their own knowledge to the problem.

Over 500 people attended the online symposium which took place deep into the first year of COVID-19. They came from many countries across the world. We want to thank them for turning up on such an important global issue, at a time when they could easily have claimed fear, uncertainty and exhaustion. We'd also like to thank our partners in that symposium, the Challenging Racism Project and the Diversity and Human Rights Research Centre at Western Sydney University and Academics for Refugees, and the presenters and panellists, who evoked thoughtful, passionate and innovative discussions: Alison Mountz, Behrouz Boochani, Omid Tofghian, Anne McNevin, Andrew Burrridge, Maria Giannacopoulos, Claire Loughnan, Julie Macken, Claudia Tazreiter, Philomena Murray and Anthea Vogl. Many of these presenters have contributed chapters to this book, and we thank them for their commitment and continued support of this work. We'd also like to thank additional contributors who brought unique and powerful insights to the topic: Kate Coddington, Michelle Jasmin Dimasi, Julia Morris and Bosco Opi.

We felt strongly that this book should also include creative pieces from refugees and people seeking asylum. Barat Ali Batoor and Hani Abdile generously gave us their extraordinary written words that captured their experiences and hopes. Lived experience is vitally important to these discussions, but it also takes an incredible personal toll, and we appreciate the generosity with which Batoor and Hani gave their words and their time.

We'd like to thank the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University for their ongoing support of our work. This includes institutional, financial and collegial support. In particular, we would like to mention our colleagues and

friends at the Challenging Racism Project, and Kate Huppertz and the School Research Committee.

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Behrouz Boochani and Omid Tofghian were instrumental to the ideas generated in this book. Their critical thinking around Australia's offshore detention policies and the Australian government's treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum have brought important language and knowledge to this topic. We thank them both for their generosity and intellect and their support of this book. We are particularly fortunate to have Behrouz write the Foreword for this book.

And finally, we would like to acknowledge the many, many people seeking asylum who have suffered under the Australian government's detention policies. Those who have spoken out, those who have been silenced, those who lost their lives under this hardline, punitive and de-humanising policy and practice. Because they dared to hope for something better. Their courage and their humanity must be remembered and celebrated.