

**Island Psyche and the Living Dead: A critical analysis of Australia's Nauru and Manus
Island Detention Centres**

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Introduction

Australia is an island.

Well, more accurately, it is a small continent and collection of islands - but this does not actually subvert the intention of the above statement. Australia stands alone in its geographic isolation from the countries which surround it, an island in metaphor and appearance if not tectonic reality. The Southern Cross - adrift amid seas.

The complex consequences this has for the cultural psyche of a people is an important piece of reflection - what does it mean to be an Australian, and in what ways do these ocean borders affect the way that Australia conceives of itself as an actor on the world stage? The island boundaries of Japan were famously reflected for hundreds of years in its culture and foreign policy of *Sakoku*¹ - the rejection of any foreign presence and deferral to an isolated state of affairs. An island, which thanks to its geographic qualities, was able to cut itself away from any form of international consciousness for a prolonged period of time. For Australia - this island psyche is far less explicit, but perhaps just as observable².

The Manus and Nauru Regional Processing Centres, both established by the Australian Government in 2001, have become a notorious point of critiquing Australia's foreign policy and resistance to international obligations. On these sites, migrants seeking refuge within Australia's borders have been detained and held offshore, with no freedom of mobility or clear expectations as to their legal situation or future. The poor infrastructure and ignorance of rights which exists in these camps have resulted in a series of deaths related to health conditions and guard brutality

¹ Conrad Totman. "From sakoku to kaikoku. The transformation of foreign-policy attitudes, 1853-1868." *Monumenta Nipponica* (1980): 1-19.

² Michael Grewcock. "'Our lives is in danger': Manus Island and the end of asylum." *Race & Class* 59, no. 2 (2017): 70-89.

- which in turn has been reflected in various resistance campaigns which have been organized by the detainees. This has culminated in a strained relationship between the Australian government and the larger framework of international legal norms, and has been denounced by many.

It is, however, not only a point of controversy with which to critique the Australian Government, but a deeper indictment about the use of power and coercion by bureaucratic forces as a whole. Applying the Foucauldian concept of biopower, as well as Hannah Arendt's thoughts on citizenship and Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, a harsher reality about the Manus and Nauru centres is unveiled. No longer understood simply as the forced detainment of migrants - the sites become a reflection of the commodification of human life and the exercise of increasingly expansive state enterprises over vulnerable groups. When understood through this critical philosophical lens, the Manus and Nauru centres become a foreboding example of state to individual power relations with implications which challenge the very conception of the outer limits of migration and statecraft as a whole.

Methodology, Assumptions and Considerations

An important consideration in this paper is the lack of clear and expansive media reports detailing life within the camps. The control of journalistic voices over these centres has been extensive, and as a result, reporting on the issue is inconsistent and unclear³, with some of the most detailed coverage coming from detainees themselves through WhatsApp conversations⁴. To circumvent this issue in research, the scarce reports that do exist, as well as the meditated actions of those detained there, will be held as source evidence of conduct within the camps. This will be

³ Madeline Gleeson. "Offshore: Behind the wire on Manus and Nauru." *University of New South Wales Press*. (2016).

⁴ Megan K. Stack. "Behrouz Boochani Just Wants to Be Free." *The New York Times Magazine*. (4, Aug, 2020)

treated as inductive evidence, with the consequences and responses to the treatment of detainees being the primary method for discerning the overarching situation they faced. This of course limits discussion in some ways, but not necessarily within the scope of this paper - which is the philosophical implications of this situation.

With this in mind, it is worthwhile to state that the primary research method taken in this paper is the analysis of primary and secondary sources detailing events which have occurred in the camps. Extensive news articles and interviews have been cited, as well as the accounts of detainees, to weave together an image of the reality which existed in the two processing centres.

This paper additionally operates under the assumption that the Manus and Nauru camps can be understood as a system akin to prisons - allowing for language such as 'inmate' and 'detainee' to describe those who are held there, and for terms such as 'detainment camp' to describe the centres. While certainly not the stated categorization of the centres by the Australian Government, this view is supported by voices such as former detainee/journalist Behrouz Boochani and philosopher Omid Tofighian who have explicitly discussed the realities and implications of Manus Island *as* a prison⁵. This will be even further justified in regards to the Foucauldian lens which this paper operates within. Regardless, the term 'detainee' specifically has been chosen as an unbiased reflection of the fact that these migrants have indeed been 'detained', regardless of whether or not Manus Island should be constituted as a prison itself.

Additionally to note, this paper maintains its political discussion within the realm of Australian politics, and specifically their relation to migrant detainment policy. While there is certainly a case to be made that these centres are a manifestation of ongoing global anti-migrant

⁵ Sue Nash, Behrouz Boochani, and Omid Tofighian. "Manus prison theory: Borders, incarceration and collective agency." *Griffith Review* 65 (2019): 275.

sentiments, this is beyond the scope of this paper, and will not be explored at any length. With that being said, the varying governments which have held office over the course of the operation of Manus and Nauru have had an effect on the situation within the centres, which can hardly be ignored. Regardless of the implications this creates, the discussion of Australian domestic politics will be limited to their direct effect on the two camps.

Manus and Nauru Centres and their Implications for International Norms

The Manus Island and Nauru Regional Processing Centres are a set of offshore sites where the Australian Government detained migrants seeking asylum, primarily between 2001 and 2017⁶. Located on the titular Papua New Guinean province of Manus Island, and on the Micronesian state of Nauru, these sites represented the physical space of a wider reaching set of policy practices which sought to diminish the flow of migrants into Australian territory. Australia is the only country in the world that stipulates a mandatory period of detainment for those arriving in the country sans visa⁷, and has located these centres off shore so as to avoid any legal claims to asylum. Many detainees have died from their time on Manus and Nauru, not because of explicit violent action taken against them in all cases, but as a result of general poor treatment and medical insufficiency. The deprivation of their mobility, dignity and rights has left those detained there in a state of particular vulnerability to the Australian government, where both their physical and mental states are being actively degraded. This has led to one publication describing the situation in the camps as a ‘slow violence’ conducted against the detainees⁸.

⁶ "Why is the Manus detention centre being closed?" *Al Jazeera News*. (29, Oct, 2017)

⁷ Francesco P. Motta. "'Between a Rock and a Hard Place': Australia's Mandatory Detention of Asylum Seekers." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* (2002): 12-43.

⁸ Tiffany Page. "Self immolation and asylum in Australia: 'This is how tired we are'." *openDemocracy*. (18, Aug, 2016)

The poor conditions and treatment forced upon these migrants have not gone without direct consequence - as the centres have experienced a great concentration of protests and resistance organized by those being held within. A riot occurred in 2013 in Nauru, leading to the escape of between 300 and 500 detainees⁹. Another major one occurred on Manus Island in 2014, resulting in the death of the 23 year old detainee Reza Barati. This in turn attracted much media attention, with the public distraught about the unsafe conditions which existed in the centres¹⁰. His convicted killers, two centre staff members, were tried and charged with murder, but only after the major media frenzy that ensued¹¹. Another riot occurred on Manus in 2017 over new food distribution processes which stunted the dignity of detainees, marking yet another instance of unrest closer to the end of the site's lifespan.¹²

However, these riots, resulting from tensions in the centres, only provide a section of the full image. Coordinated campaigns of resistance have been employed by the detainees to certify their rejection of this treatment and to reclaim some of the dignity and sovereignty which had been stripped from them. Hunger Strikes were organized on several occasions by hundreds of detainees to make a political point about their refusal to condone their treatment, even to the point of starvation¹³. Even more macabre, certain detainees have committed acts of self-immolation - suicide through setting oneself on fire - to resist and make a statement about the injustice within the camps. One case of self-immolation was undertaken by a former detainee

⁹ "Police attend full-scale riot at asylum seeker detention centre on Nauru." *ABC News*. (19, Jul, 2013)

¹⁰ David Wroe and Sarah Whyte. "Reza Barati: Two men arrested over death of asylum seeker at PNG detention centre." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. (19, Aug, 2014)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Melissa Davey. "Manus Island detainees riot over new food distribution system – reports." *The Guardian*. (19, Mar, 2017)

¹³ Madeline Gleeson. "Offshore: Behind the wire on Manus and Nauru." *University of New South Wales Press*. (2016).

who sought to take a political stance against the situation¹⁴, while yet another was attempted by a 12 year old girl being held on Nauru¹⁵. These politicized suicides, which will be examined in greater detail in a subsequent section, serve as a dark yet emphatic statement about dignity and liberty. If a rational individual prefers to starve to death or light oneself on fire over continuing to tolerate a situation which has resulted from Government policy, then perhaps said policy should be called into question. Regardless of any argument about migration protection and borders, the actions of these individuals speak for themselves as to the injustice that has resulted from Australia's particular approach.

It has nonetheless been shown that despite the issues occurring in the camps, the Australian Government has remained mostly resolute in their belief that such a policy was legal and justified, until recent times. In response to condemnations from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Australian Government stated that the processing centres were "...administrative in nature and not for punitive purposes."¹⁶, rejecting any narrative which argued the contrary. To even further demonstrate the gap between public image and reality, the Parliament of Australia published a study on the realistic healthcare requirements of those held on Manus and Nauru¹⁷, nonetheless failing to deal with the issue that they themselves acknowledged within the paper, as evidenced by the deaths of detainees and the eventual lobbying by Australian doctors to change the existing inadequate measures¹⁸. The Australian

¹⁴ Tiffany Page. "Self immolation and asylum in Australia: 'This is how tired we are'." *openDemocracy*. (18, Aug, 2016)

¹⁵ Ben Doherty. "Nauru self-harm 'contagion' as 12-year-old refugee tries to set herself alight." *The Guardian*. (22, Aug, 2018).

¹⁶ Ben Doherty. "UN body condemns Australia for illegal detention of asylum seekers and refugees." *The Guardian*. (7, Jul, 2018)

¹⁷ Rebecca de Boer. "Health care for asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island." *Canberra: Department of Parliamentary Service, Parliament of Australia* (2013).

¹⁸ Mary Lowth. "Australia and the Nauru files: doctors fighting for the human rights of asylum seekers." *The British Journal of General Practice* 67, no. 663 (2017): 465.

response is one of appearances - making claims to justice and legality while condoning a great transgression of human rights through their actual policy practice. It even appears to come to a point of scorn, with former Immigration Minister / Current Prime Minister Scott Morrison reportedly telling those on Manus to their faces during a state visit to the camp that “[they] will never see the shores of Australia.”¹⁹

Regardless, external to Australia and the Government in particular, the camps have been widely denounced. The United Nations Human Rights Council working group on arbitrary detention dubbed the situation on Manus and Nauru as an example of ‘illegal detention’ and called for the immediate closure of both camps as well as the payment of reparations to those who had been detained there²⁰. More consequentially, in 2016, the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea declared the centres to be illegal, pointing to the restriction of the right of liberty of the detainees²¹. The entire situation has been most publicly catalogued and criticized by Behrouz Boochani, a former detainee on Manus Island who has become a major figure in regards to journalistic coverage of the issue. He has detailed his first hand experiences as well as ongoing events through strings of WhatsApp text coverage and a plethora of published material, including his memoir of experiences in the camp; ‘No Friend but the Mountains’ as well as a documentary film that covers the major issues²². Beyond this, many high profile Australian public figures have spoken out against the policy of detainment, most notably in the form of an open letter signed by

¹⁹ Oliver Laughland, Christian Bennett and Bill Code. “Scott Morrison visit sent Manus tension soaring, says G4S whistleblower.” *The Guardian*. (28, Apr, 2014)

²⁰ Ben Doherty. “UN body condemns Australia for illegal detention of asylum seekers and refugees.” *The Guardian*. (7, Jul, 2018)

²¹ Eric Tlozek and Stephanie Anderson. “PNG’s Supreme Court rules detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island is illegal.” *ABC News*. (26, Apr, 2016)

²² Megan K. Stack “Behrouz Boochani Just Wants to Be Free.” *The New York Times Magazine*. (4, Aug, 2020)

twelve former recipients of the ‘Australian of the Year’ honour, which criticized their government’s conduct²³.

The ongoing controversy surrounding the camps eventually did force some concessions from the Government, and has ultimately defused the primary structure of the detainment system. Following the denunciation by Papua New Guinea’s Supreme Court, negotiations began between the two countries to organize the closure of the Manus Island Centre, with Papua New Guinea no longer willing to host or tolerate it²⁴. This in turn spurred the negotiation of a deal between Malcolm Turnbull’s government and the United States to resettle large numbers of detainees, not only from Manus, but from Nauru as well²⁵ - indicating the slow closure of the system as a whole. The Manus Island Centre was officially closed in October, 2017²⁶, with inclarity as to the exact status of Nauru, although certainty that it was being dismantled simultaneously.

To supplement this movement, in 2019, the Medevac Bill was introduced - a piece of legislation aimed to give medical practitioners greater say over the treatment and movement of detainees- largely as a consequence of the deaths which had occurred in the camps²⁷. This has resulted in the transfer of many former detainees to the Australian mainland to receive medical treatment, albeit while still being subjected to government control over their movement and body. The Medevac Bill was later repealed by Scott Morrison’s Government near the end of the

²³ Helen Davidson. “Twelve former Australians of the Year condemn government and urge action on Manus” *The Guardian*. (23, Nov, 2017)

²⁴ Stephanie Anderson. “Manus Island detention centre to be shut, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O’Neill says.” *ABC News*. (27, Apr, 2016)

²⁵ Stephanie Anderson, Francis Keany, Eric Tlozek and Mandie Sami. “Malcolm Turnbull, Peter Dutton announce refugee resettlement deal with US.” *ABC News*. (12, Nov, 2016)

²⁶ “Why is the Manus detention centre being closed?” *Al Jazeera News*. (29, Oct, 2017)

²⁷ Isabella Kwai. “Australia to Allow Medical Evacuation for Nauru and Manus Island Detainees.” *The New York Times*. (12, Feb, 2019)

year²⁸, despite the fact that many medical transfers had already occurred. In March 2020 it was reported that Nauru still held 211 people, Papua New Guinea; 228 and 1,220 still being held on the Australian mainland for medical treatment²⁹ - a situation creating new tensions and protests domestically in of itself³⁰.

While no longer in operation, the legacy of these camps weighs heavy on Australian politics. Controversies surrounding the Medevac bill still abound years later³¹, and the detainees who yet remain on the islands serve as a reminder to remain vigilant as these policies are dismantled. Even more damning for those who hope for deep rooted cultural change in the wake of these centres is the fact that Scott Morrison, the man who sat as Immigration Minister during the worst years of these centres, and he who withdrew the Medevac Bill, serves as Australia's bonafide Prime Minister³². The struggle to ensure the rights of these migrants and to resist the entropic policies of Scott Morrison has become a centrepiece object for activists³³ - no doubt a defining conflict for years to come among the Australian Left.

One of the greatest implications of the system set in place by the Nauru and Manus Island Regional Processing Centres was its subversion and avoidance of international legal norms - specifically that of non-refoulement. By taking migrants and sending them to offshore detention centres for 'processing' - the Australian government was simultaneously deferring

²⁸ Kate Walton. "‘Dark day’: Australia repeals medical evacuation for refugees." *Al Jazeera News*. (4, Dec, 2019)

²⁹ Stefan Armbruster. "Dozens of refugees flown from Australia and PNG to US despite coronavirus travel bans." *SBS News*. (21, May, 2020)

³⁰ Hannah Ryan. "Refugees detained in Brisbane deny claims activist have endangered their safety." *The Guardian*. (19, Jun, 2020)

³¹ Hannah Ryan. "Refugees detained in Brisbane deny claims activist have endangered their safety." *The Guardian*. (19, Jun, 2020)

³² Daniel Lopez. "If the Hell Scott Morrison Believes in Exists, He Would Be Destined for it." *Jacobin Magazine*. (6, Dec, 2019)

³³ Hannah Ryan. "Refugees detained in Brisbane deny claims activist have endangered their safety." *The Guardian*. (19, Jun, 2020)

the possibility for them to claim asylum while not sending them back to their source country either. A clear subversion of what the actual intent of ‘non-refoulement’ is supposed to be - this practice was a technicality that spared Australia from explicit deviations from international legal norms while nonetheless employing a policy of isolation and xenophobia. Actually analyzing the foundational justifications of this policy as well as its place in reflection to Australia’s international obligations makes clear that it is flawed in its very premise³⁴. In constructing this policy, Australia has cast itself as a nation that, at the very least, does not comprehend its responsibilities to the world around it, if not one that actively avoids them altogether. Catching asylum seekers before they arrive in Australian soil and sending them offshore for ‘administrative purposes’³⁵ is little more than a clever rejection of the very basic migratory principle of non-refoulement, among other concepts³⁶. In this, Australia has revealed a darker aspect of its nature - not as the liberal democratic state it parades itself to be - but as a solitary nation that is perfectly willing to ignore international legal norms and give in to a xenophobic migratory policy.

Biopower and Necropolitics

One of the most compelling theoretical ideas with which to conceive of the situation on Manus and Nauru is through the lens of French philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’ - an enduring theory of the power relationship between individual and state.

³⁴ Francesco P. Motta. "“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”: Australia’s Mandatory Detention of Asylum Seekers." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* (2002): 12-43.

³⁵ Ben Doherty. “UN body condemns Australia for illegal detention of asylum seekers and refugees.” *The Guardian*. (7, Jul, 2018)

³⁶ Francesco P. Motta. "“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”: Australia’s Mandatory Detention of Asylum Seekers." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* (2002): 12-43.

Foucault, who was critical of society and coercion as a whole, defined biopower as the means through which a state or power entity provides infrastructure to ensure codependence from its citizenry and establish control over their lives. In this way, structures such as health care and schools are understood as tools of coercion used to create stability for the state apparatus and its control over those who live within it³⁷. The primary strength of applying such a theory is not to understand overt exercises of power, such as policing and military, but the subtle ways in which human agency is commodified by existing power structures. Foucault aptly states that Biopower is “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.”³⁸ While more traditional conceptions of power exercise are at play on Manus and Nauru, Foucault’s biopower opens an avenue of deeper understanding as to the situation which exists in the detainment centres. Suddenly, instead of simply understanding the situation through its use of walls and guards, the power which is being claimed over the life and dignity of the migrants takes on an even greater connotation. While it was indeed achieved through the use of force, those being held in the centres were stripped of their freedom and made compliant to this prison-esque apparatus of the Australian regime. Biopower helps to take the discussion away from explicit forms of subjugation and to frame the subversive methods at play - such as food distribution, and the lack of mobility offered to leave the centres. With this being said, Foucault is more important in providing the building blocks for understanding this situation, and the concept of biopower alone is not entirely sufficient.

³⁷ Vernon W. Cisney and Nicolae Morar. “Biopower: Foucault and beyond.” *University of Chicago Press*. (2015).

³⁸ Michel Foucault and Robert Hurley. “The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction.” *Vintage Books*. (1990): 136

Although not a direct interpretation of her work, German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt's conception of statelessness also applies here. From a discussion of rights and citizenship, Arendt analyzes how those who have been stripped of their citizenship, and thus left without constitutional right, are in a legal situation in which they hold very little autonomy or power - instead left primarily to the discretion of how the host state they find themselves in wishes to deal with them³⁹. Of course, not all of the detainees on Manus and Nauru are literally stateless, and are instead primarily composed of refugees and asylum seekers who presumably still hold some form of citizenship in a source state. The comparison, admittedly an abstraction of Arendt's point, is that, through loopholes and Australia's avoidance of international legal obligations, the detainees on Manus and Nauru have been left in a unique legal situation where their usually conferred rights have been uncertainly stripped from them.

This is not a primary philosophical tool with which to understand the situation, but an observation on its nuances and complexities which in turn informs biopower and, in this context, the difference of control exercised between detainees and normal Australian citizens. Both have become an appendage of the Australian polity, but by applying Arendt's views on citizenship, the difference which exists between the two groups becomes all the clearer. Due to their literal or metaphoric statelessness, those on Manus and Nauru have been made even more vulnerable to Australia's biopower - creating a new and differentiated situation which can not be fully understood within the limited confines of Foucault or Arendt's work.

Building from both of these conceptual shortcomings, Cameroonian Philosopher Achille Mbembe introduces an even more macabre understanding of biopower's outer limits -

³⁹ Hannah Arendt. "The Origins of Totalitarianism." *New York: Harcourt.* (1951).

‘Necropolitics’ - also understood as the right to kill, or in Mbembe’s introductory words “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die”⁴⁰. In his work of the same name, Mbembe critiques what he perceives to be holes in Foucault’s conception of biopower, and expands the ideas to encompass a grander reaching theory of the establishing power relationships between state and individual. Distinct from Foucault - Necropolitics instead explains the commodification and sovereign subjugation of human life, detailing situations where, through a corrupted exercise of biopower, a power apparatus gains complete control over life, its quality and its end.

An important part of this concept is what Mbembe dubs in the conclusion as ‘the living dead’ - those who, through the exercise of necropolitics over them, have been reduced to an inferior state of existence that deprives them of life and freedom while additionally denying them the final escape of death itself, which he quotes Paul Gilroy in describing as “a release from terror and bondage.” for those who are persecuted by necropolitics⁴¹. This is the most composed form of his theory, where necropower not only describes the states claim to power over things such as capital punishment and war, but as the assumed treatment of politically persecuted groups and perhaps more specifically, inmates and detainees. Through the exercise of necropolitical power subjugation in contrast with the denial of death as a final escape, human life is commodified by these power structures, and made into a tool of control. For those subjected to this reality, it creates a new and unique existence, where sovereignty over the body and of one's own life is actually turned into a weapon of subjugation. In his closing statements, Mbembe states;

⁴⁰ Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Duke University Press Public culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11

⁴¹ Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Duke University Press Public culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 39

“I have demonstrated that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Moreover I have put forward the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.”⁴²

In this, the image of the Australian detainees immediately comes to mind. Through their capture, and Australia’s circumvention of international law, those held on Manus and Nauru have been reduced to a state where necropolitics define their lives. Devoid of any freedom of mobility, and kept under prison-like supervision by a foreign government, they are prime examples of what Mbembe conceived of as ‘the living dead’. This once again is reminiscent of Arendt’s conception of the stateless⁴³ - where, through biased interpretations of protections under international law, those held on Manus and Nauru have been stripped of their intended rights and left as bodies to the whim of Australia’s treatment.

With all this being said, a comparison with necropolitics has already been made regarding a similar situation to that of Manus and Nauru. In her 2014 book ‘Starve and Immolate’, Banu Bargu explores campaigns of hunger fasts and self-immolations in Turkish Prisons by political prisoners as a means of resisting against increased penitentiary powers, starting in 2000 and

⁴² Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Duke University Press Public culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 39-40.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt. “The Origins of Totalitarianism.” *New York: Harcourt.* (1951).

extending for several years⁴⁴. Based from a discussion of Foucault and Mbembe, Bargu argues that, through their politicized suicides, these inmates in fact took hold of the necropower which the Turkish government was attempting to control them with, and used it as a means of protest to resist that same exercise of control. In this, the human life is not understood as a stationary item to protect, but as a resource - monopolized by the state, stolen from the state and then weaponized against the state by its very victims.

Bargu's application of necropolitics here can be directly re-applied to the situation on Manus and Nauru where, as mentioned, detainees engaged in riots⁴⁵, hunger strikes⁴⁶ and self-immolations⁴⁷ to oppose the situation they had been forced into. Not dissimilar from the Turkish political prisoners, the detainees on Manus and Nauru understood the implications that their deaths of protest created, and used this to its maximum effect in drawing public attention and outcry to the centres. Manus and Nauru ultimately provide a profound example of Necropolitics in action - both through the state's monopolization of human life, and the resistance against it. Treated as commodified life by the Australian government and sent to offshore detainment centres in violation of their rights and of international norms - the detainees of these sites have doubtlessly been subjected to a necropolitical treatment. One need look no further than the fact that detainees were given no clear indication as to how long they would be

⁴⁴ Banu Bargu. "Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons." *New York: Columbia University Press*. (2014).

⁴⁵ Melissa Davey. "Manus Island detainees riot over new food distribution system – reports." *The Guardian*. (19, Mar, 2017)

⁴⁶ Madeline Gleeson. "Offshore: Behind the wire on Manus and Nauru." *University of New South Wales Press*. (2016).

⁴⁷ Ben Doherty. "Nauru self-harm 'contagion' as 12-year-old refugee tries to set herself alight." *The Guardian*. (22, Aug, 2018).

held there⁴⁸ to demonstrate that their quality of life was being treated as a disposable resource by the Australian Government.

Events such as the murder of Reza Barati (the detainee who died in the 2014 Manus riot) and the trial of his killers⁴⁹ take on a darker connotation under Mbembe's conception of the living dead. Barati's denial of rights, subjugation to prison conditions and stripping of dignity were deemed legal, but his withdrawal from this 'deathworld'⁵⁰ - a crime to be punished. Outrage only erupted when necropolitical control over his life was no longer possible - not when he was a living being who was being subjected to unlawful detainment. In this way, the people who only spoke up following deaths, like that of Barati, are complicit in the system as guarantors of the necropolitical subjugation of the survivors. When the point of controversy is framed to be the deaths of detainees, the conversation is actively being distracted from the reality of the living people being deprived of their rights and dignity. This is the most important truth that necropolitics holds for the Manus and Nauru case. While it is tempting on a surface level to look at the deaths as the main point of critique - doing so is casting the blame on an unfortunate result of the policy - not the initial premise of Australia creating a migrant detention system which sought to make those within it bodies to their necropolitical whim; the living dead.

This is not to say that the deaths of the detainees are unimportant under a necropolitical lens - far from it. Mbembe clearly seeks to explain the political power inherent in a human life, and the way in which power structures commodify it - intrinsically placing importance on the

⁴⁸ Behrouz Boochani. "How many more people must die on Manus before Australia ends indefinite detention?" *The Guardian*. (3, Jun, 2019)

⁴⁹ David Wroe and Sarah Whyte. "Reza Barati: Two men arrested over death of asylum seeker at PNG detention centre." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. (19, Aug, 2014)

⁵⁰ Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Duke University Press Public culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 39-40.

deaths of those held on Manus and Nauru. Instead, the argument is that, through this exercise of explicit necropolitical power over an already vulnerable group, a new truth about state conduct and migratory policy has been unveiled. As troubling as the deaths of Reza Barati and others may be, the true horror of the Manus and Nauru centres is the fact that, for so many years, the Australian government was able to legally justify the creation of a ‘living dead’ population, and that its critics could only find the language to oppose this system in the wake of deaths.

Mbembe’s necropolitics helps to expand our conception of what is actually being infringed upon in these situations - the dignity and quality of the life which is being controlled. Loss of human life is only the last stage of the subjugation which has been inflicted here. Necropolitics helps to reframe what is so troubling about this situation, and expands on the implications that it holds. If Australia can find legality in commodifying and subjecting the lives of those seeking asylum, what can then be said about the way other countries strip autonomy and decision making from their migrant populations⁵¹? By understanding Australia’s detainment of migrants as an exercise of necropolitics, a greater truth about power relations and subversive democratic state conduct is unearthed - no matter how pessimistic it may be. All life can be made material to the state’s discretion, and it is only through examples like that of Manus and Nauru where we see this truth in an unmasked environment. Naked, violent and cruel.

Conclusion

⁵¹ Ulrike Krause, Hannah Schmidt. “Refugees as Actors? Critical Reflections on Global Refugee Policies on Self-reliance and Resilience.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33 no. 1 (2020): 22-41.

Far flung from the surface level critiques levied against the Manus and Nauru centres, a Necropolitical lens distinguishes the underlying power relationships which were constructed within the camps and the theoretical consequences they necessitate. Seeing the commodification of life which is created by a migrant detention system creates an implicit moral dilemma - not only for the Australian case in particular, but to a lesser degree, for any similarly coercive state practice. Even as the centres seem to have closed, they have perhaps more accurately entered into an uncertain future, where the remaining unapologetic government seems to aim for an entropic stance to the dissolution which has been set in motion, indicated by the repealing of Medevac⁵². Even as history has arguably set its position on the topic⁵³ - the fate of Australia's migrant detainees rest in the seemingly unsympathetic hands of Scott Morrison - not exactly a true blue aussie bloke.

Nearing the final words of this paper, and thus the opportunity to discuss the farther reaching implications which conclusions so often indulge in, the metaphoric aspect of this topic comes to the forefront. As much as Manus can be seen to be a literal prison, it is perhaps greater understood as a symbol for the experience that refugees encounter in host states. To delve even deeper into the quagmire of Foucauldian thought; is not all life for the migrant a form of prison? Whether it be a limited understanding of local cultural practices, an isolation from one's own culture or the prejudice which are so often reaped upon them; the migrant is in many ways sentenced to a life of hardship and compliance upon arrival. While not physically expressed, the migrant child with not a clue towards the appeal of hockey finds themselves in a psychological prison of sorts when arriving and seeking socialization in Canada, especially when that country's

⁵² Kate Walton. "‘Dark day’: Australia repeals medical evacuation for refugees." *Al Jazeera News*. (4, Dec, 2019)

⁵³ Ben Doherty. "UN body condemns Australia for illegal detention of asylum seekers and refugees." *The Guardian*. (7, Jul, 2018)

natives further take it upon themselves to act as warden. In Australia, this metaphor becomes literal. Manus Island represents our proclivity, as humans, for misunderstanding and prejudice towards 'the other'. To deny those most vulnerable a welcome place in our society, instead leaving them on the edges, to wallow in their desperation.

Australia's detainment camps have inadvertently taken on an almost poetic aspect - acting as a remorseful metaphor for the way that many host states cast their conception of migrants. The 'otherization' of these people and the justification of such poor treatment is ultimately condemning, not of the failure of international institutions, but of Australia's cultural understanding of international norms and humanitarian responsibilities. It is the Island Psyche at play - a failure to conceive of oneself as part of a larger human community. Instead, the governments which have built these systems seem to think of Australia as an exception to the rest of the world.

Will those who lie dead in the soil of Manus and Nauru weigh at all on Australia's island psyche? Will the pressure to step up to international responsibilities and obligations to human rights one day be reflected in how Australia approaches these issues?

The macabre final verse of Australia's unofficial national song 'Waltzing Matilda' come to mind. A mourning, an invitation and perhaps an accidentally touching point of reflection for a migrant policy that has hurt so many, and for those who saw how their life had been commodified and defiantly resisted against it.

"Up jumped the swagman and dived into the billabong,
'You'll never catch me alive!' said he,

And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong,
Who'll come a Waltzing Matilda with me?"⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ Matthew Richardson. "Once a jolly swagman: the ballad of Waltzing Matilda." *Melbourne University Publishing*. (2006): 211

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