Chapter Six

Indefinite Imprisonment, Infinite Punishment

Materializing Australia’s Pacific Black Sites

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In December 2015, close to a thousand men held in indefinite, mandatory detention in Australia’s “Regional Processing Center” on Manus Island, in the Pacific state of Papua New Guinea (PNG), sent a grim Christmas greeting to the Australian Prime Minister and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection:

Hello Dear Mr Malcolm Turnbull and Peter Dutton

As the refugees and asylum seekers trapped in Manus Island detention we would like to request you something different this time. As previously we wrote and asked for help and there was no response to our request to be freed out of detention we realized that there are no differences between us and rubbish but a bunch of slaves that helped to stop the boats by being in hellish condition. The only difference is that we are very costly for the Australian tax payer and the politicians as our job to “stop the boats” is done.

We would like to give you some recommendations to stop the waste of this huge amount of money . . . and to keep the Australian borders safe forever.

A navy ship that can put us all on board and dump us all in the ocean (HMAS is always available)

A gas chamber (DECML will do it with a new contract)

Injection of a poison (IHMS will help for this)

This is not a joke or a satire [. . .]. We are dying in Manus gradually, every single day.

Best regards

Merry Christmas in advance

Manus refugees and asylum seekers
The authors, many of whom are UN-recognized refugees, are insistent that their letter is no joke or satire; rather, it follows to its logical conclusion the logic of “deterrence” by which Australia justifies its policy of compulsory and indefinite offshore imprisonment for anyone who seeks asylum by boat. They proceed to outline, in the language of bureaucratic communication (we are very costly for the Australian tax payer; we would like to give you some recommendations to stop the waste), a series of measures that could be undertaken by agencies already implicated in the project to complete the task at hand more efficiently and economically.

The three organizations named are the navy and Her Majesty’s Australian Ships (HMAS), who are responsible for boat turnbacks and for impounding asylum seekers and refugees at sea and transporting them to places of imprisonment offshore; DECMIL, the private corporation contracted by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) to construct and supply the East Lorengau detention center on Manus Island where the letter’s signatories are held; and International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), the private provider responsible for medical services in Australian onshore and offshore detention. In singling out these three agencies, the men name the critical infrastructure of Australian offshore detention and, chillingly, pinpoint the ways in which this infrastructure, ostensibly designed to protect, is already invested with lethal capabilities. They demonstrate their understanding that these lethal capabilities are not potential, but rather are inherent in the apparatus of indefinite detention and infinite punishment in which they are trapped: we are dying in Manus gradually, every single day.

The consciousness of death is pervasive in the writings and the art of the thousand or so men, euphemistically referred to as “transferees,” held by force on Manus Island. Imran Mohammad, a stateless Rohingya refugee, wrote recently: “It has always been felt that we would never leave this island alive” (Mohammad 2017). In each of his minutely rendered drawings of life on Manus, Eaten Fish, one of the inmates who has since won international acclaim as a cartoonist, features the graves of the men whose deaths are directly attributable to the offshore regime. A key image from the film Chauka, which consists of footage of the Manus camp shot on a mobile phone by another, now internationally known, inmate, the writer Behrouz Boochani, sums up the exterminatory impulse that governs these Australian offshore detention places: it depicts a worker, fully encased in protective gear, spraying the structure’s grim surrounds (mesh and chain link fences, converted shipping containers, shoddy utilities) with a fog of chemicals. From within, we watch as the toxic haze penetrates the narrow passages between two accommodation blocks, enveloping an inmate who stands there. The visual allusions to the concentration camp, with its logic of extermination and disposability, are unmistakable (see Figure 6.1).

In dialogue with such representations by their inmates, this discussion aims to consider Australia’s offshore detention camps as sites marked by distinctively punitive and prohibitive features. As places whose declared aim is to punish those who have sought asylum by boat and block the arrival of future boats, Australian offshore detention sites stand out among other camps for refugees and asylum seekers—although there is some indication that other states in the global north increasingly seek to follow its example. At the same time, these offshore prisons share historical and structural continuities with the overlapping (though not interchangeable) formations of the concentration camp, the space of exception, and the black site. These continuities are frequently noted by the inmates themselves, as they name, through a heterogeneity of media, the conditions of disposability and death in which they live. In doing so, paradoxically, they mobilize remarkable, inventive powers and bring to bear extraordinary creative energies that defy the status of the virtual ban imposed on them. This dynamic is akin to that identified by Irit Katz between the “power over life” that governs the structure of the contemporary refugee camp, and the “power of life” by which camp inhabitants nonetheless create spaces that “accommodate the everyday life of its dwellers in all their complexities” (2017, 9).

This chapter argues that the powers of life activated among the inmates designated as disposable and the bare lives on Manus Island extend further than those of “everyday life” to a power that is fully mobilized and embodied in its resistive energies, one that is deeply politically conscious, as well as confident in its analytical and creative potentiality. Seemingly disappeared
on a prison island, held incommunicado and out-of-sight, the men of Manus prison camp yet manage to effect what might be described, as “a space of appearance” (Mirzoeff 2017, 19–20) in which they make themselves visible as political subjects, both in Australia and across a global landscape. The materialization of this political space of visibility is at the heart of this chapter.

ANTI-SHELTER: THE CARCERAL GEOGRAPHIES OF AUSTRALIA’S PACIFIC SOLUTION

Australia’s camps on the Pacific island states of Nauru and Papua New Guinea are facilities designed, in conceptual, spatial, and legal terms, as an architecture that is the very antithesis of shelter: they are carceral spaces intended to engender fear and revulsion, inflict pain and suffering, and maximize a sense of exposure to danger. Their operation as a form of anti-shelter is enabled by their situation, in turn, within specific spatial and legal geographies that reinforce colonial relations of power and heighten racialized and economic divisions in the region. One such geography, as discussed in detail elsewhere, is that of a shifting borderscape that effectively reorganizes Australia’s borders by excising selected areas of its territories from its own migration zone while extending its sphere of operations through shifting networks of offshore carceral sites, regional bases, and covert “on-water” operations by which asylum seekers’ boats and bodies are forcibly moved and trafficked through the region (Perera 2007).

As distinct from understandings of the border as a singular and static line demarcating the territorial limits of a state, for asylum seekers arriving by boat, the Australian borderscape functions as a set of makeshift and proto-geographies, defined by spatio-legal technologies (excision, extraterritorialization, deterritorialization); militarized practices (surveillance, interception of boats, enforced turnbacks); neocolonial and racial geopolitics (between former colonizer and former colonies, between global north and global south), and historical and ongoing contestations of sovereignty (among individual states; between state powers and requirements of international law; between states and the neoliberal corporations and contractors who act as their agents). The borderscape both remakes and reinforces divides among neighboring states, as historical relations of colonial sovereignty are reworked in the present through neoliberalized economic and cultural relations of power (aid, trade, technology, infrastructure), as well as militarized practices for securitizing and controlling the region.

This border zone now stretches from Nauru and PNG in the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka all within its reaches. Cambodia is the latest of the region’s economically and politically vulnerable states to be annexed into this ever-expanding borderscape, where a system of diffused and outsourced sovereignties is deployed to violently block and imprison refugee bodies, while buffering and insulating Australia from their contaminating presence (Hawley 2014). Nominated as a settlement location for “genuine refugees” who seek to come to Australia, Cambodia, like its impoverished Pacific counterparts, Papua New Guinea and Nauru, has been recruited as an agent of Australia’s own billion-dollar trafficking in refugee bodies—mapped as a way station into its geography of deterrence and punishment. Even more recently, Australia and the United States have become part of each other’s manipulations of a carceral borderscape, as the former agreed to resettle a group of Cuban arrivals to the United States who had been disallowed under its “wet foot/dry foot” policy (Perera 2013). In exchange, the United States contracted to resettle up to 1,200 refugees from the Manus and Nauru camps (Davidson 2017).

In the unvarnished terms of the policy under which they were created, the express purpose of Australian offshore detention camps is to confer “No Advantage” in the search for safe harbor, and to ensure that no child, woman, or man seeking asylum by boat will “ever set foot on Australian soil” (Shaw 2003) even if he or she is determined to be a refugee under the terms of the United Nations Conventions Australia has signed. Working in tandem with other policies such as boat turnbacks at sea and the mandatory and indefinite detention of all boat arrivals who do make landfall, Australia’s establishment of offshore camps as places of “deterrence” constitutes a distinctively punitive approach to asylum seekers. In the words of a report by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “Few other countries go to such lengths to deliberately inflict suffering on people seeking safety and freedom” (AI and HRW 2016).

The Pacific Solution, as it is officially named, was first put in place by Australia in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, when a Norwegian ship, the MV Tampa, took on board a few hundred asylum seekers in distress at sea during their voyage to Australia (Perera 2002). These asylum seekers, mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq, were not allowed to disembark on Australian ground, and were forcibly taken to hastily set up camps that Australia established on the neighboring Pacific state of Nauru, a former Australian colonial protectorate that remains heavily dependent on Australian aid. The enabling rhetoric for the operation tied the arrival of asylum seekers by boat to possible infiltration by terrorist “sleepers” and an attack on Australian sovereignty (Marr and Wilkinson 2003). During the five years of its operation, the Pacific Solution was marked by chaotic management, disease, and outbreaks of self-harm among inmates. These Pacific camps closed in 2007, with most of the inmates being found to be refugees and dispersed to New Zealand and, eventually, Australia.
In 2012, however, the Pacific Solution was reinstituted, on even harsher terms, as the end of the war in Sri Lanka and heightened repression in Iran brought new boat arrivals. Australia established a new offshore camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, and recommissioned the Topside camp, situated on a mine site in Nauru that it had closed in 2007. Families, as well as unaccompanied women and children, were transported to Topside camp. The Manus Island camp, on a former naval base, was reserved for unaccompanied males. (Manus detainees strongly reject the official description of themselves as “single men” since many are husbands and fathers; it is also clear that, due to the dubious official processes used to assess age, some of them were underage at the time of their imprisonment.) In the six years, at the time of writing (2018), since the camps were established, there have been a spate of shocking media revelations of abuse and sexual violence against children and adults—women and men—in the camps; local communities have clearly expressed their resentment against the imposition on their land, and a series of ever more condemned reports have been issued by the United Nations and other international agencies. Nothing has led to a change of course on the part of the Australian state.

THE SPATIO-LEGAL TECHNOLOGIES OF AUSTRALIAN OFFSHORE DETENTION

Although what follows is concerned with the second incarnation of the Pacific Solution post 2012, the conditions under which Australia’s Pacific camps were first established remain critical to understanding their formation and continued function in the present. The spatio-legal and political geographies of Australia’s Pacific camps are made intelligible by the insidious association of the arrival of refugees aboard the Tampa with the 9/11 terror attacks and subsequent invasions, by a US coalition that includes Australia, of Afghanistan and Iraq. Although many of the Tampa arrivals were in flight from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan or from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and in no way linked to the 9/11 attacks, they were repeatedly associated with terrorism in the speeches of the then Australian prime minister and immigration minister. The conflation of Iraqi and Afghan refugees and terrorism in a climate of Islamophobia provides the backdrop for the establishment of Australia’s Pacific camps as extraterritorial holding places for captive aliens. In this sense, these camps are counterparts of Camp X-Ray and Camp Delta established at Guantánamo Bay in the early years of the war on terror.

A prior exchange between the politico-historical geographies of the United States’ Guantánamo Bay camp and Australia’s Pacific Camps sug- gests that these connectivities are also structural. From 1991 to 1994 the United States used its Guantánamo Bay naval base as a place of detention for more than 30,000 refugees from the military coup in Haiti, denying them entry into the territorial United States. Immediately after, from 1994 to 1995, more than 20,000 Cuban asylum seekers were imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay, again on grounds that they were not entitled to protection outside the territorial limits of the United States (Gregory 2006, 412). The argument pivoted on the ambiguous location of the US base at Guantánamo Bay, outside the territorial limits of the United States, but still within its legal purview under the (disputed) terms of its lease with Cuba. Although the complicated legality of the camp at Guantánamo Bay has been subject to judicial challenge, it is precisely its ambiguous location, between national and international law, both internal and external to the United States, that has led to extensive discussions of its characterization as a space of exception (Agamben 2005).

Australia’s Pacific camps combine two key features of the US base at Guantánamo Bay: the latter’s prior history, as a place for holding asylum seekers outside the state’s territorial limits, and its present, as a place of punitive treatment for suspects in the war on terror. Located outside Australian territory, and nominally the responsibility of the Nauru and Papua New Guinea governments, the camps on Nauru and Manus Island also share the features of other “black sites” established by the United States in the war on terror. The name of the collective Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites (RAPBS) explicitly draws attention to these links. RAPBS highlights three characteristics Australian offshore camps share with black sites: their external location, which enables sovereign responsibility to be deferred or disowned by the administering state; the involvement of private contractors and corporations, further obscuring questions of accountability; and extreme levels of secrecy that shield the camps from independent scrutiny:

Black sites are most often located in racialized and/or formerly colonized territories, and they continue practices of abuse and torture previously perpetrated there against colonized peoples. We refer to Australia’s camps on its own former colonial territories of Manus Island, PNG, and Nauru as black sites in order to highlight their structural connections with other extra-legal or illegal places of confinement, abuse and torture.

Australia’s camps on Manus Island and Nauru operate at arm’s length, in territories where ultimate responsibility for what takes place there is disowned and sovereign authority is obfuscated or endlessly deferred. These black sites are often run as commercial operations by private contractors who operate between domestic and foreign places of confinement and between zones of peace and war. (RAPBS 2015)
Refugees and asylum seekers forcibly transported to these extraterritorial zones are held indefinitely and without legal charge. While torture is not an acknowledged practice in the camps, the punitive “deterrence” regime functions deliberately to inflict and exacerbate levels of mental and physical punishment that are tantamount to torture. In their analysis of the treatment of some detainees, RAPBS reference the US Torture Memos, wherein the critical threat to the health of an inmate is recognized only at the point of organ failure (Perera and Pugliese 2015a).

Australia’s Pacific camps are zones of dubious legality, constituted through a patchwork of bilateral memoranda, official decrees, and commercial contracts; they are entities transacted in the gaps between domestic and international law and at the uneven intersections of judicial systems. A case in point is the High Court of Australia’s consideration of a challenge to the constitutional legality of the government’s offshore detention operation on Nauru. Only two days before the High Court was due to rule, the Nauruan government decreed that the processing center would from then on operate as an “open” facility, with detainees “free” to come and go as they wished within Nauru (Perera and Pugliese 2015b). This decree, in turn, was preceded by carefully crafted emergency legislation in the Australian parliament granting the government retrospective authority “to provide assistance to other countries to carry into effect the arrangements for the processing and management of unauthorised maritime arrivals who have been taken to regional processing centers” (Cowper and Doran 2015). These paired preemptive measures by the Australian parliament and the Nauruan government effectively colluded to determine the course of the High Court’s judgment. In February 2016, a majority of the Australian High Court duly found that the Australian government did possess the constitutional authority to carry out its program of offshore detention (Gleeson 2016). Noting that the High Court made its ruling in support of this program “despite the case itself being another key component of the mounting evidence of the suffering that was/is being sanctioned by such a decision,” the legal scholar Maria Giannacopoulos (2016) concludes:

The evidence of state violence exists not only in the art and testimony of those resisting it but in the official documents of the system itself. The Australian High Court decision of February 2016 declaring offshore imprisonment lawful is a detailed and chilling archive of the harm resulting from the laws that this pronouncement of law re-sanctions.

The law thus becomes complicit in “re-sanctioning” the forms of violence that are at the same time made visible through its own processes.

The convolutions through which the law “re-sanctions” the violence of offshore camps is even more evident in a cluster of rulings by the Australian and PNG courts with regard to the Manus Island detention camp. In 2016 the PNG Supreme Court unanimously found that the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island breached the right to personal liberty guaranteed by PNG’s constitution and issued a firm and unambiguous directive for the closure of the camps:

Both the Australian and Papua New Guinea governments shall forthwith take all steps necessary to cease and prevent the continued unconstitutional and illegal detention of the asylum seekers or transferees at the relocation center on Manus Island and the continued breach of the asylum seekers or transferees’ constitutional and human rights. (Tolzok 2016)

Celebrations by Manus inmates and their supporters at this decree that the camp was illegal under PNG law were quickly tempered, however, by Australia’s refusal to reconsider its own position, insisting that the decision was a matter to be resolved internally by the government of PNG. The men, meanwhile, remained in legal limbo in a prison environment that continued to be operated by commercial contractors funded by the Australian government—but now they were in a heightened state of insecurity compounded by growing hostility, intimidation, and, at times, direct violence, on the part of the local population. A year later, a second judgment by the PNG Chief Justice, far from reinforcing the decisive focus on constitutionality and human rights of the first ruling, severely exacerbated the insecurity and suffering of the Manus detainees by finding that the camp had now, in fact, closed, and would be decommissioned in October 2017:

[Chief Justice] Sir Salamo Injia has accepted a submission from the PNG Government, stating the center has been closed and the refugees and asylum seekers within it are now accommodated at the navy base the center was built on. The 860 men inside the center have not actually moved from their existing compounds, but have been told they are now living on the naval base. (Tolzok 2017)

As in the case of the Nauru camp being declared an “open” one overnight, the PNG Chief Justice’s decision rendered the inmates of Manus Camp even more unsafe and exposed, vulnerable to unauthorized entry by potential looters and other predators. Lacking even the ambiguous protection afforded by a locked camp, the detainees were placed in a limbo that offered neither freedom nor security. RAPBS commented, “The detainees have, through this legal sleight-of-hand, been moved to nowhere.”

In juridically declaring the detention center closed, nothing has changed for the refugees and asylum seekers detained there except for a nomenclatural change: they have been told that they no longer inhabit a detention center, even as they
have not been moved from their existing compounds; rather, the detention center, in name only, has now reverted back to its original military purpose: a naval base. A certain brutal and circular logic here fulfills itself: a naval base becomes a detention center that, in turn, reverts back to a military facility [. . .]. Through what can only be called the exercise of legal fiat, a detention center ceases, in name only, to exist, even as all the material infrastructure of the detention center is left intact and in place. (Perera and Pugliese 2017)

The lives of the inmates were placed in a state of indefinite arrest:

The refugees and asylum seekers of Manus continue to lead arrested lives: arrested on arrival by boat to Australia’s excised immigration zones and dispatched to offshore immigration prisons; arrested in the annihilating space of indefinite detention, where there is no time, and where everything is held in a state of suffocating and oppressive suspension; arrested into a state of paralyzing immobility in which there is no glimpsing of a future. (ibid.)

Yet even within the state of stasis imposed on these arrested lives, an uncertainty where the future remains in suspension, unknowable, another contrary space may be discerned—one that, at the level of visibility, exceeds the spatio-legal geographies of the black site, by bringing into view sights and scenes that were previously withheld. This is the space of appearance I explore below.

CONTESTED VISUAL ECONOMIES OF THE BLACK SITE

Located in zones of ambiguous, shifting sovereignties and positioned at the seam of legality/illegality, the spatio-legal geographies of offshore detention are structured by forms of exclusion, occlusion, indeterminacy, and blockage, removed from public scrutiny and marked by absence of accountability. Unprecedented penalties were put in place for education and health professionals and other camp workers for exposing the conditions in these offshore detention camps, while prohibitive costs and immigration requirements restricted independent media scrutiny of the camps (Whyte 2015). Yet, these Pacific black sites operate within a paradoxical dynamic that is simultaneously constituted by their very visibility, precisely as black sites—that is, as zones that are publicly cordonned off from civic space and conspicuously hidden from public view. Screened from sight by virtue of their remote location and legally protected by “national security” embargoes, “operational matters,” and commercial contracts, black sites are nonetheless part of a highly charged politics of spectacle. As object lessons in “deterrence,” they are designed to showcase the harsh treatment meted out to boat arrivals. As such, they are sites of non-visibility, rather than invisibility, persistently calling attention to that which is hidden, disappeared, forbidden, or redacted within, rather than seeking to render themselves unnoticeable or imperceptible.

The visual economy of the black site is one marked by the obscured spectacle of what yet remains non-visible, out-of-sight. The disruption of this economy of non-visibility calls for a counter-optics of presence and transparency, the materialization of a “space of appearance” at the very heart of the black site. The term “space of appearance” is one deployed most recently by Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017) in his analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement. Taking as a point of departure Hannah Arendt’s prior theorization of “the space of appearance” as “the space where politics happens,” Mirzoeff argues that the space of appearance is “not representation, either in the political or cultural sense, but the very possibility of appearing directly” (ibid., 19-20):

What is it to appear? It is first to claim the right to exist, to own one’s body [. . .]. And it is to claim the right to look [. . .]. It’s about seeing what there is to be seen [. . .] and then giving the visible a sayable name. (ibid., 18)

The Black Lives Matter movement, Mirzoeff argues, is an instance of seeing and making visible anew through an assemblage of media (cell phone videos, performative acts and die-ins, mass protests) the hitherto normalized and hence invisibilized violence of the police, and of giving this newly visible a “sayable name” through which black lives materialize a space of appearance. In analogous ways, the various media through which the inmates of Manus Island and Nauru detention camps materialize their own space of appearance disrupt the visual and spatial economies of the black site. They stage the possibility of appearing directly in political space despite their location outside Australia and their removal from the civic life of the nation. The covert mobilization of social media networks and digital technologies is critical to materializing this space of appearance. Through these means, the detainees of Manus Island camp, in particular, have succeeded in making themselves present as social actors and political commentators on the Australian scene.

One of the most telling instantiations of this space of appearance was the campaign by the inmates of Manus camp to name themselves “political prisoners” in opposition to the terms “transferees” or “illegals” deployed by the governments involved. Through smuggled cell phone cameras and social media posts, the inmates presented a direct enunciation of their status. Its space of appearance was the space of their own bodies, brought into view despite the ways in which they are literally and symbolically rendered non-visible by the economies of the black site. In solidarity, supporters reciprocated with their own embodied responses, inscriptions on upheld palms, echoing and mirroring back the prisoners’ resignification of their status. As the name of
the campaign, “Political Acts,” implies, this action was one that materialized “the possibility of appearing directly” at both personal and collective levels to challenge the disembodied labels of “transferee” and “illegal” (see Figure 6.2). What is also simultaneously materialized here is a digital space of political solidarity and co-presence, in which the quarantined borders of the camp and the black site are symbolically breached. Such acts of virtual co-appearance, such as the 2017 Facebook campaign that located supporters from all parts of the globe on First Nations land at Standing Rock, North and South Dakota, enabled political actors to become visible to one another in transnational formations. Their actions attracted global media attention.

Similarly, the protest stance that has come to characterize the daily mass demonstration by those imprisoned on Manus Island and Nauru can be understood as an act of appearance. A posture characterized by upraised, crossed arms and clenched fists, it signals both surrender and resistance, compliance and refusal: an embodied form of nonviolent refusal. Again the posture is one adopted in protests elsewhere and on the Australian mainland, performed as a gesture of solidarity, like the “hands up, don’t shoot” that Mirzooff identifies as a “signature gesture” (2017, 96) of the Black Lives Matter movement. Repeated and restaged on Australian streets and in government offices taken over by protesters, the Manus salutes bridges the separation between offshore camp and the civic spaces of the nation, between citizen and prisoner, legal and illegal.

The space of appearance of the Manus political prisoners is one materialized also in other forms of embodied testimony. One notable instance is the artwork of Ali Dorrani, an inmate of Manus prison for more than four years, who cartooned under the name Eaten Fish. As detailed elsewhere, Eaten Fish’s minute documentations of prison life persistently disrupt the visual circuits that inscribe the Manus camp, drawing attention to “the dynamics between that which is seen and not seen, between what is kept in the dark and what is brought to light, between watching and hiding, and between surveillance and visibility or exposure” (Perera and Pugliese 2016a). Eaten Fish insists on the documentary function of these drawings: “Every story I said in my drawings is nothing but the truth. I drew whatever happened to me” (Eaten Fish, in Perera and Pugliese 2016b).

Eaten Fish’s drawings, compiled over the years of his captivity, record the myriad ways in which the inmates of Manus Island are rendered targets, driven to the edges of endurance in hellish surroundings. In each of the drawings, the graves of the inmates who have died in detention appear, beginning with the grave of Reza Barati, killed in a violent rampage by locals through the camp in 2014, followed by the death of Hamid Kehazaei, who died of septicaemia following a minor cut, and Omid, a refugee on Nauru who self-immolated and was not airlifted in time to save his life. Eaten Fish’s more recent drawings documented the deaths of two more inmates at Manus prison: Faysal Ishak Ahmed, a Sudanese refugee aged twenty-seven, was airlifted to Australia too late despite the repeated pleas of fellow inmates, and died on Christmas Eve 2016. A few months later, in August 2017, twenty-eight-year-old Mamed Shamshirpour, a mentally ill Iranian asylum seeker, was found hanged in suspicious circumstances. Once again repeated pleas for urgent medical treatment had been ignored. By mid–2018, at least ten inmates were known to have met their deaths in offshore detention (Bui et al. 2018).

During 2016–2017, Eaten Fish’s cartoons formed the impetus for a national campaign in which cartoonists from all over Australia rallied in his support. In a powerful act of co-appearance, they contributed their own cartoons calling attention to the conditions of his imprisonment and petitioned for his removal from Manus Camp for urgent medical treatment (Perera and Pugliese 2016a, 2016b). The ensuing global visibility of his plight culminated with Cartoonists Rights Network International’s selection of Eaten Fish as the 2016 recipient of its Courage in Editorial Cartooning award:

Eaten Fish is one of those whose work as a cartoonist brings to light the horrors that are happening around him. CRNI believes that his body of work will be recognized as some of the most important in documenting and communicating the human rights abuses and exacerbating agony of daily life in this notorious and illegal prison camp. His work pushes through the veil of secrecy and silence and layers of fences in a way that only a talented artist speaking from the inside can. We hope that this award will help shine a brighter light on the excesses of this camp. (CRNI 2016, emphasis added)

As it sought to bring to light the abuses perpetrated out-of-sight in offshore detention, the cartoon campaign also represented a further stage in the “possibility of appearing directly” for the political prisoners of Manus camp. Eaten

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Figure 6.2. Space of Appearance: From the project Political Acts in which inmates of Australian offshore detention camps redefined themselves as “political prisoners” rather than the “illegal arrivals” of the government’s terminology.

Fish’s cartoons cannot be understood in isolation, but are part of a concerted program of appearance that includes writing, art, film, music, and a host of other acts of embodied creativity and testimony.

In establishing offshore detention sites as places of unrelenting isolation, where inmates were held communicado, in alien and mostly hostile surroundings, the Australian government also unwittingly established the conditions for these sites to function as crucibles of resistive solidarity. Alice Krupa, a former social worker at the camp, notes:

There was a collective experience of separation and displacement which united the men. The loss of someone’s wife, mother or child was felt throughout the camp, and there were steady streams of visitors to anyone with a recent bereavement. (Krupa 2017)

Left with few resources, the men began to forge their strengths as a collective:

The refugees were farmers, accountants, journalists, artists, programmers, veterans and students. They spoke multiple languages, watched the news closely, debated politics, had heated cricket and soccer tournaments, sung, composed, drew, crafted and painted with whatever materials they could access.

One of the refugees called Manus his “university” [. . .]. Conversations invariably revolved around politics, religion and the future of Manus. (Krupa 2017)

The refugees formed a focused and highly mobilized community able to harness its collective energies in a highly organized manner. Held communicado, they drew on their internal strengths, using them to build networks with activists, artists, and academics outside, through groups such as Writing Through Fences and Writing Through the Wire. The space of appearance claimed by the inmates of Manus prison suggests the forms of agency and resistance that may yet be mobilized even within the unrelenting structures of the camp and the black site.

The paradoxical possibilities of this space are best expressed by Imran Mohammad, a Rohingya refugee who learned English during his years of incarceration, and who, like Boochani and Eaten Fish, is now able to breach the confines of Manus camp to claim a presence in Australian media and writing communities, and beyond:

I fell in love with writing, which has meant my survival over these four years. My passion for writing has been fueled by my craving for both knowledge and the need to communicate facts and reality of life in the detention center. I was encouraged by one of my teachers to develop this. I did the best I could in this horrendous environment and concentrated on studying English and writing. Now I am able to speak for myself and the many others who cannot explain their distress. (Mohammad 2017)

In marked distinction to previous years, when advocates acted as spokespeople and mediators for refugees held communicado behind the razor wire, Manus prisoners themselves are now a notable presence as authors and commentators in their own right in mainstream media. In the months and weeks leading to the violent breakup of the camp by Australian and PNG agents in November 2017, they maintained communications with and represented their plight to the outside world, enabled by a network of hidden mobile phones and phone cards donated by activists. After electricity to the camp was cut by the authorities, these were powered by donated solar panels. Their collective actions as their camp came under siege, Behrouz Boochani writes, enabled the men to reclaim themselves despite the brutalizing and dehumanizing conditions of their imprisonment:

For these twenty-three days before our violent removal we experienced, for the first time in over four years, some sense of autonomy. But it was not individualistic or rationalistic. Propelled by the deprivation of our liberty, we found an autonomy embedded in social relationships and shared experience. In giving primacy to relations of care and cooperation we did not compromise our autonomy but instead made it possible. We became free only in relation with others. This was compassion, egalitarianism and interdependence in direct opposition to oppression and domination. It was the embodiment of feminist values, but it emerged and was nurtured among hundreds of incarcerated men. (Boochani 2018)

APPEARING THEMSELVES

The paradoxical realization of sense of autonomy and freedom and an embodiment of what Boochani names as “feminist values” among “hundreds of incarcerated men,” stands as a testimony to the extraordinary energies mobilized in the space of the camp. The men not only created the conditions for these values to emerge and be nurtured within the camp, but also assumed responsibility for communicating the full significance of these events to the world outside. Boochani, as journalist and filmmaker, is the most prominent spokesman for the camp, a regular contributor to the opinion pages of Australian media and often quoted by international sources such as the New York Times and Al Jazeera, but other collective voices, too, command a presence, claiming the right to address Australia’s political leaders directly—not as supplicants, but as political agents, as in the Christmas greeting with which this chapter began.

Yet, the materialization of a space of appearance did not mean an end to the violence of the state. “The Messenger,” a podcast made from 5,000 WhatsApp messages sent on a smuggled smartphone by the Sudanese refugee Abdul
Aziz Muhamat, was awarded one of Australia’s most prestigious journalism awards, the Walkley (Mannion 2017), even as the camp was being violently broken up and the men dispersed among different prisons on Manus Island. On November 24, 2017, close to four hundred remaining inmates of the Manus Camp were forcibly removed from the camp by PNG authorities (Boochani 2017b). Since the decommissioning of the camp on October 31, the men had held out for almost three weeks with no official access to power, food, or water. The improvised wells they had constructed were violently smashed by guards, and their possessions, including stores of donated provisions of food, water, mobile phones, and phone cards, were trashed. Terrified men hiding in toilet blocks or under piles of rubble kept up a stream of information until the very last members of the group were rounded up with the aid of police dogs and transferred to other holding places.

Despite this violent eviction, Boochani asserted in a manifesto published only a few days later that what is important to mark here is not the forcible removal of the refugees, but the fact that they held out for so long. To cite at length from this extraordinary poet-activist manifesto:

What are the conditions and the framework that give rise to a resistance constituted by half-naked men on a remote island known as Manus? And what are the messages that this resistance is attempting to convey?

The refugees are overpowered.

The refugees have had extraordinary pressure imposed on them.

The refugees have resisted an entire political system; they have stood up to the power of a whole government.

From the very beginning right through to the very end, the refugees only used peaceful means to stand up and challenge power.

The refugees have asserted their authority.

The refugees have claimed power.

The refugees were able to re-envision themselves in the face of the detention regime.

The refugees were able to re-envision their personhood when suppressed by every form of torture inflicted on them and when confronted by every application of violence [. . .].

In fact, what has occurred is essentially a new form of identification, which asserts that we are human beings.

The refugees have been able to reconfigure the images of themselves as passive actors and weak subjects into active agents and fierce resisters [. . .].

The refugees have been able to refigure the image of themselves as the “Other.” We have reshaped the understanding of us as politically inept and have been successful in projecting an image of who we are. We now present to the real face of refugees for a democratic Australia to discern. (Boochani 2017c)

Refashion, reinvent, reconfigure, and reimagine are key terms of the manifesto, insisting on the ability of the refugees to appear themselves, to “project an image of who we are,” in their own terms. As they present the real face of refugees for a democratic Australia to discern, their act of appearance in turn gives way to a reciprocal act of discerning by those Australians who are active observers and witnesses of this transformation from “weak subjects into active agents and fierce resisters.”

The resistance to the breakup of the camp stands as a form of embodied poetics; in Boochani’s words, it is “an epic constituted by half-naked bodies up against a violent governmentality” (Boochani 2017c):

This profound poetic performance was implemented on another occasion when we were facing off against a group of police officers [. . .].

When the police chief stood in front of the community of half-naked refugees and named the leaders over the loudspeaker, asking them to surrender themselves, everyone called out:

“I’m A . . . !”

“I’m Y . . . !”

“I’m B . . . !”

Asserting their collectivity, defying the attempts to divide them, the “half-naked refugees” appear themselves as the leaders of their own movement, their only weapons the poetic power of their linked bodies:

We linked our arms to create a chain and told them that we only had love for them. We recited this as a poem that then became a collective expression:

A poem that united us.

A poem that we chanted in unison.

A poem of peace.

A poem of humanity.

A poem of love. (Boochani 2017c)

“THE REFUGEES HAVE CLAIMED POWER”

I conclude this chapter on the materialization of the camp with the words of Behrouz Boochani, who continues to be one of the key agents in bringing its invisibilities before the world outside. Writing a few days before the breakup of the camp, Boochani called for a final act of imagination by the reader, as a subject who, regardless of his or her individual positionality, cannot but be implicated in the violence that continues to transpire for the prisoners of Manus:
It is enough for people to imagine themselves, only for a moment, in the place of a refugee imprisoned in Manus; enough for people to imagine themselves as someone whose human dignity has been debased over these years; enough to imagine the torture this refugee has had to endure. Imagine there is nothing positive to look forward to in the future for this refugee; possibly his partner has left him; or his children have been left alone; his dreams have been shattered. He has become a mere subject for the media, a mere subject for reporters, a mere subject for photographers, a mere subject for politicians, a mere subject for human rights activists, a mere subject for intellectuals and researchers. Over these past years they have all been reinforcing a huge industry that is built on the indefinite imprisonment of this refugee. And after four and a half years they now decide to transfer him to another prison and, according to Peter Dutton’s promise, provide him with three meals a day. The issue is plain and simple. We did not come to Australia to live in a prison. The peaceful protest by refugees is not because we want to remain in this prison. We are resisting because we want freedom in a safe environment. The core concern is freedom [...] only freedom. The rest of what you hear are just peripheral issues. (Boochani 2017a)

REFERENCES


