

Dialogue: Asylum Seekers in the Pacific  
(Manus, Nauru)

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*Guest edited by J C Salyer, Steffen Dalsgaard,  
and Paige West*

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The Pacific Solution (2001–2008) and Operation Sovereign Borders (2012–present) expanded Australia’s territorial and juridical borders through the establishment of three offshore regional processing centers in the Pacific nations of Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Manus Island) and on Christmas Island (an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean). On Nauru, over two thousand asylum seekers and refugees were detained indefinitely in camps and temporary accommodations while resettlement claims were processed in Australia (Australian Border Force 2019; Phillips 2012). The offshoring of human detention constitutes one trajectory of Australia’s neocolonial operation across the Pacific region, a role that unfolds from a legacy of Commonwealth-driven extractive colonialism through the decimation of natural resources. While several of the essays in this collection unravel the ways that social and political relations in Papua New Guinea are impacted by the detention industry, this essay takes a geographical approach that centers human and nonhuman environments together to show how a history of resource grabbing and exploitation in Nauru is backlit by the contemporary imperial occupation of the island as a military and security site. This exploitation is made feasible by the nation’s precariousness within a nexus of geopolitical and ecological violence.

In order to understand the conditions faced by asylum seekers on Nauru, it is critical to investigate the wider socioenvironmental changes faced by the island’s Indigenous and nonindigenous populations. Reminiscent of the historical experiences of regional neighbors on Banaba (Teaiwa 2014), more than a century of strip-mining by the Pacific Phosphate Company (Britain and Germany), the British Phosphate Commissioners (Britain,

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Australia, and New Zealand), and, finally, the Nauru Phosphate Corporation or Republic of Nauru Phosphate has left most of the island uninhabitable and has forced Nauruans to adapt to resultant health, food, and ecological damages. Intersecting with this, the island's location in the Pacific, its intensive exposure to climate-related hazards like heat, drought, coral bleaching, erosion, and sea level rise and its limited economic capacity for adaptation all mark it as highly vulnerable (see Bino, this issue).

This essay draws on firsthand testimonies from Indigenous Nauruans and my own ethnographic field observations to outline the relationship between environmental, infrastructural, and economic risks and deterrence and incarceration. In late 2018, I was invited to Nauru by the Ministry for Commerce, Industry and Environment to speak with public servants, community leaders, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations about their climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. I documented observed changes to the island's reefs, lagoons, and landscape, as well as community initiatives to address these changes. Drawing from this empirical evidence, I argue that environmental crises play a crucial role in an Australian regime of governance in which isolation, insecurity, and natural disaster are weaponized to constrain the possibilities for movement and settlement.

While at the time of writing there are no refugees still housed at the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, the experience of refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru has been, from numerous accounts, torturous. Multiple instances of self-harm, severe mental health crises, physical illnesses, and the death of both adults and children have been testified to by detainees and reported by medical staff. The Australian Medevac Bill, passed in early 2019 and repealed in late 2019, enabled the transfer of critically ill refugees and asylum seekers (and their families) to Australia for treatment. Other refugees and asylum seekers imprisoned on Nauru have either been returned to their country of origin or been resettled in Cambodia, the United States, or Canada (Australian Senate 2017). However, there has been no indication that the offshore system or its infrastructure will be permanently dismantled.

As such, infrastructure remains available for recommencement, a move that has precedent in the camp's closure in 2008 and subsequent reopening in 2012 under Operation Sovereign Borders. Led by the Australian military, Operation Sovereign Borders was designed to deter and desist all arrivals by sea in order to, as the 2010 Liberal Party election slogan put it, "stop the boats" (Holmes and Fernandes 2012). Along with aggressively

defensive multilingual messaging and online multimedia information campaigns, naval boats were shown refusing vessels entry into Australian waters, and asylum seekers and refugees were deported to the territories of Nauru, Manus, and Christmas Island. Earlier derisory comments, such as former Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer's statement that Nauru was the "worst place he had ever visited," correlated to horror stories of basic conditions relayed by aid workers (Wheeler 2011). As former Immigration Minister John Hodges described, Nauru was "by far the worst of the detention centres" (Mares 2002, 132), both onshore and offshore. Such descriptions set the scene for the indictment of Nauru as a hostile environment.

### CREATING HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

Underlying, and critical to, the hostile narrative mobilized through both Operation Sovereign Borders and the social justice and abolitionist campaigns calling to close the camps is the representation of Nauru's geographical and social terrain as desolate and inhumane, which both resonates with and deviates from the messaging on Manus Province, as other essays in this dialogue show. The branding of Nauru is part of the Australian border security strategy (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The inhumane conditions imposed on Nauru's refugees and asylum seekers not only illustrate the Australian government's failures to attend to human rights rhetoric and international law frameworks but also show how ecosystems themselves are increasingly leveraged to shore up securitization and militarization strategies. Through a close examination of specific sites and conditions, in this essay I demonstrate how the impacts of global and regional climate catastrophe exacerbate the ongoing impacts of mining and imperialism, creating a context that engenders social tension and conflict between Nauru's inhabitants. The violence of incarceration imposed by the Australian and Nauruan partnership is impossible to decouple from the broader environmental catastrophe faced by Nauru itself. Reports from case workers and medical practitioners working in the camps told of uninhabitable "harshness": extreme tropical heat, drought, mosquito plagues, and lack of access to clean drinking water and fresh food are exacerbated by electricity shortages and inadequate—even toxic—living conditions (see, for example, Wilson 2015; Martin 2018; Australian Human Rights Commission 2014). While aspects of these physical detriments are unique to the camps' infrastructure and organization, particularly in rela-

tion to its geographical positioning along the mining site, it is important to note that even after the “opening” of the camps, the narrative remains unchanged. The geophysical challenges faced by asylum seekers are similarly being contended with by Indigenous Nauruans as they respond to the impacts of climate change.

As anthropologist Katerina Teaiwa has shown, Nauru’s environmental crisis is not exceptional. It emerges from a legacy of extractive colonialism following the discovery of phosphate, a mineral essential to agricultural development (Teaiwa 2014, 100–105). Human life, both Nauruan and refugee, is rendered fungible and surplus to this resource, evidenced through strategies of occupation and, now, detention. Before the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, the antipodean story told about Nauru focused on the dramatic boom and bust of the mine and the loss of its consequential wealth. This story begins with Nauru’s being claimed as a possession of the German empire in 1888 and the subsequent discovery of phosphate on the island. Between 1905 and the late 1970s, huge amounts of phosphate were sent largely to Australia and New Zealand to fertilize arid soil, precipitating industrial-scale agriculture (Gale 2019; Viviani 1970, 186–187).

Heavy mining, bombing, and successive occupations by Australia and Japan during both world wars—including the forced displacement of Nauruans to Chuuk by the Japanese military and their resultant near extinction—decimated Nauru’s socioenvironmental ecosystem. Nauruans fought to regain control over their island, and in 1968 Nauru was declared independent, finally ending Australia’s trusteeship. By that point, almost half of the island had been strip-mined. Post-independence, Nauru’s government purchased its mining rights from Australia and intensified mining activity, which led to an economic upswing. In 1989, Nauru initiated proceedings with the International Court of Justice, arguing that Australia had massively undervalued its phosphate royalties and was liable for the rehabilitation of the mining site (Weeramantry 1992). In 1993, the case was settled, and Australia was ordered to repay Nauru, establishing the Nauru-Australia Compact of Settlement (Storr 2017). The money was ultimately mismanaged, and the rehabilitation process languished. As the compact came to an end in 2012, Nauru reaffirmed its agreement to host the regional processing center. Media commentators suggested that detained refugees might find work through the restoration project (Walker 2012). What the so-called rise and fall of Nauru epitomized, argued legal scholar Cait Storr, was “the tension between the principle of political self-

determination that developed during the post-war decolonisation movements, and the brute logic of economic and environmental sustainability” (2017).

### LIVING WITH ECOSYSTEMIC COLLAPSE

As offshore detention was established in 2001, there were already signs that the availability of habitable land was an issue, with serious effects on health, housing, access to food and water, and biodiversity (Blake 1992). Nauru covers just 21 square kilometers (13.6 miles), the middle and top of which has been largely mined out. The mine site now consists of bare dirt and rock, with some vegetation, and three detention facilities and a local jail provide the only infrastructure. Huge limestone pinnacles reach skyward, punctuated by steep gullies into which, I was warned by a Nauruan, people have fallen to their deaths. The stripped land, combined with drought and temperature rise, makes the area unbearably hot, humid, and inhospitable. In 2014, a report by Biological Health Services concluded that all three processing centers were acutely contaminated with mold due to a combination of tropical humidity and building materials inadequate to withstand environmental conditions (Doherty 2018). The increasing heat was noted by several Nauruans with whom I spoke. As Darice Bari, the project coordinator for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change told me, along with the conditions caused by heat and humidity, the inescapable proximity to an active mining site has contributed to residents' poor health. The close proximity of the centers to the mining sites mean that the tents are permanently covered in dust and debris, as are houses along the processing pathway. Many families at these sites suffer from asthma and chronic lung disease (Bari, pers comm, 9 Oct 2018). In 2017, the Australian Lawyers Alliance further evidenced danger posed to Nauruans, asylum seekers, and processing center employees by cadmium leakage associated with phosphate mining.

Mining has also impacted the intersection of health, water, and land. Displacement to coastal areas drives Nauruans and refugees housed in the community onto a diminishing ribbon of land. With the mine on one side, and the eroding shoreline on the other, there is nowhere to go when king tides wash over the road. Along the northern parts of the island, coastal erosion has already forced landowners to move, and while sea walls have been erected by the government and by families to protect some areas, they force the tidal swell onto others, meaning homes are inundated either

way. When sea flooding occurs, the only road running around the island is disabled, severely limiting access to services. The mine has also had a hugely negative effect on the islands' natural water table. As Chelser Buraman, CEO of Republic of Nauru Phosphate Corporation, explained, intensive primary mining necessitated the removal of over six meters of soil and vegetation and, along with the secondary mining from the pinacles, has resulted in a receded and contaminated water table. Along with mining effluent, saltwater from floods and general sea level rise and rubbish from the dump both leak into the water table (pers comm, 5 Oct 2018). Community leader Ann Hubert described additional toxins from human remains: limited cemetery space due to decreasing land area means that burials are taking place in undesigned areas, and the resulting contamination has led to multiple reported cases of trachoma in the Nauruan community (pers comm, 7 Oct 2018). As water strategy manager Jaden Agir outlined, while most of Nauru, including the detention centers, gets its water from the desalination plant, the delivery of the water can take a long time, and when something goes wrong, experts have to be flown in to fix it. Rainwater is another option, but not everyone has a tank to catch it, and severe droughts are common (pers comm, 4 Oct 2018).

The combination of drought, a polluted water table, and decreasing land has taken an immense toll on food security. Nauru is documented as having one of the highest rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes in the world (McLennan and Ulijaszek 2015). This is linked to an almost absolute reliance on imported goods. Despite the instantiation of kitchen gardens, which feed several families (Thaman 1995), Bern Douwouw, the manager of the Taiwan Technical Mission demonstration farm, said that many people along the coast feel that their soil is not adequate for growing food because of water contamination and that lack of access to clean water is an issue (pers comm, 5 Oct 2018). Imported food is for the most part necessarily nonperishable, and I was told that there are long queues whenever a shipment of rice is due to arrive. In one supermarket I went to, produce is prohibitively priced, with cucumbers marked at A\$13 (US\$8.62) each, and a small basket of cherry tomatoes at A\$20 (US\$13.26). For the majority of Nauruans and detainees, access to fresh produce is limited.

Food insecurity is compounded by the depletion of reef fish stocks, which the government hopes to address through the eventual establishment of locally managed marine areas to bolster fish diversity and increase numbers (Frank Ribauw, pers comm, 9 Oct 2018). Reef fish are a key pro-



tein source and are vital to sustaining the Nauruan subsistence economy. With an increasing population, more stress is being imposed on already declining fish levels. John Starr, a coastal fisheries manager at the Nauru Fisheries Marine and Resources Authority, told me that mining has affected the reefs, especially around the harbors where the phosphate is transferred from land to sea (pers comm, 5 Oct 2018). He stated that where the phosphate dust falls into the water, the coral is much less abundant and less healthy than it is across other parts of the island. Overfishing and mining refuse are worsened by warming waters and coral bleaching, and fishers are being forced out past the reefs and into deep water to find food. The government has initiated an aquaculture project to address declining fish populations, and there are plans to reestablish populations of freshwater milkfish, a practice with a long history on the island. Currently held in large tanks, the fish will be introduced into waterways and ponds to ease some of the pressure on reef fish. However, because the groundwater is currently contaminated, the fish will also become contaminated, and even if the fish are only used to feed livestock, the contamination will still be passed up the food chain.

The destructive impact of over a century of mining on the natural environment cannot be emphasized enough. Nauru's Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity asserted that "mining has brought almost total loss of native forests including flora and fauna that have once covered 80 percent of lands on the central plateau of our island" (Government of the Republic of Nauru 2014, 2). Additionally, heat, erosion, and coral bleaching are taking a toll on the island's wildlife diversity, with birds, fish, and larger marine creatures all appearing to be affected.

A growing population on Nauru, intersecting with decreasing land, food, and water security, sets the scene for antagonism between Indigenous Nauruans, refugees, and asylum seekers. I was told that the economic disparities between Nauruans and asylum seekers were causing resentment and envy, as Nauruans saw asylum seekers as "benefiting" from access to housing, utilities such as air conditioning, and resources such as medical care imported from Australia (Hubert, pers comm, 7 Oct 2018). Similarly, as on Manus Island, campaigns of fear and animosity generated by the Australian government between Indigenous populations and detainees to dissuade incoming asylum seekers, coupled with descriptions of Nauru as a "hell hole," created tensions between the various groups (Hubert, pers comm, 7 Oct 2018). As with Manus people, the close connection and cultural identification of Nauruans with their ancestral land

makes such depictions offensive. What is lost in this discourse is a wider context that recognizes degrading socioenvironmental conditions within a larger framework of environmental racism and extractive colonialism (Bullard 1993). From all accounts, asylum seekers have been desperate to leave, evidenced by accelerating acts of self-harm (Hedrick and others 2019). Environmental stress exacerbates social stress, creating violence and despair. The economic alliances between Nauru and Australia mean that this situation is complex and, for most Nauruans and all asylum seekers, highly oppressive and unjust.

#### CARCERAL ENVIRONMENTS: NEW REGIMES OF NEOCOLONIAL CONTROL

In this essay, I have shown how the impacts of climate catastrophe intersect with the impacts of extraction to create hostile environments in Nauru. Nauru illustrates an emerging regime of neocolonial governance in which isolation, insecurity, and a rapidly changing climate are weaponized to deter the possibilities for movement and settlement. For asylum seekers, the island itself is considered carceral territory because of its history, its future, and its Pacific geography. Limited study and work opportunities, and an uncertain economy coalescing around both phosphate depletion and the emptying of the camps, affect Nauruans and asylum seekers remaining on the island, and both are caught within global discourses that are set to further intensify as ecocide propels migration. The fact that Nauru may produce climate refugees in the future is not lost on its people. In early 2019, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made an offer to Nauru that addressed this directly. It is predicted that at the very most Nauru has twenty years left before secondary mining is fully exhausted (Buraman, pers comm, 5 Oct 2018). While deep seabed mining is being investigated as an alternative, strong opposition has erupted from neighboring Pacific countries. Rudd's offer leverages this instability. Recognizing the vulnerability of Nauru, he stated that Australia would adopt the responsibility of climate relocation in exchange for custodianship over "their territorial seas, their vast Exclusive Economic Zones, including the preservation of their precious fisheries reserves" (Rudd 2019). Slammed as "imperial thinking" by Tuvaluan Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga (Sauer 2018), Rudd's assertion typifies the frontier imaginary underpinning Australia's continuing intervention in the governance and livelihoods of the Pacific Islands. That Australia is angling to profit from

the crisis faced by Pacific nations and exacerbated by Australia's insistence on coal and fossil fuel extraction is without doubt. For Nauruans this is simply the continuation of a historical injustice. As Ann Hubert concluded, "self-determination is more or less trying to survive, especially in Nauru. There's a big, big question mark what the future is in Nauru" (pers comm, 7 Oct 2018). It is thus worthwhile to closely attend to the dynamics of climate, securitization, and migration that are unfolding in Nauru and to place these within wider analyses of how environmental disaster, and its deepening of global inequality, is being strategically mobilized to consolidate power.

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