

PHOTOESSAY

Manus to Meanjin

A case study of refugee migration, polymorphic borders and Australian 'imperialism'

Abstract: This non-traditional research article argues that the refugee and asylum-seeker protests in Brisbane's Kangaroo Point between April 2, 2020 and April 14, 2021 can be viewed against a backdrop of Australian colonialism—where successive Australian governments have used former colonies in Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea as offshore detention facilities—as a dumping ground for asylum-seeker. Within the same context this article argues that the men's removal to the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention is a continuation of this colonial policy of incarcerating 'undesirables' on occupied land, in this case on Meanjin—Jagera land identified by the colonial name of Brisbane. This extension of Australian sub-imperial and neo-colonial dominion and the imagining of its boundaries is viewed through the theoretical prism of a polymorphic border, border that shifts and morphs depending on who attempts to cross it. In a departure from orthodox research practice, this article will use visual storytelling drawn from photojournalism praxis alongside more traditional text-based research prose. In doing so, it will use photojournalistic artifacts and the visual politics that surround them, as core dialogical components in the presentation of the article as opposed to using them as mere illustrations or props.

Keywords: asylum seekers, Australia, case studies, human rights journalism, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, photojournalism, polymorphic borders, refugees, research methodologies, storytelling, visual politics, visual storytelling

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Photojournalistic practice, research and the visual turn

THE CONVERSATION on refugee migration, and perhaps more poignantly its mediatisation, has largely focused on the linguistic framing of refugees, and their migration experience, within the wider space of social and political discourse—largely ignoring the visual.

Bleiker et al. (2013) argue this media framing often sidelines visual framing in contemporary research. They argue refugees are routinely dehumanised by representing them in groups devoid of ‘recognisable facial features’. They note ‘these dehumanising visual patterns reinforce a politics of fear...’. Furthermore, Höijer (2004) maintains that imagery shapes perception in a way that words cannot, ‘The compassion that the audience expresses is often directly related to the documentary pictures they have seen...’. She argues, ‘pictures, or more precisely our interpretations of pictures, can make indelible impressions on our minds, and as a distant audience we become bearers of inner pictures of human suffering’ (p. 520).

Bleiker (2015) states ‘images play an increasingly important role in global politics but pose significant and so far, largely unexplored methodological challenges’. He argues that humanities scholarship is increasingly acknowledging the potential of visual elements to generate meaning, so much so that we are now moving away from purely textual analyses and placing greater emphasis on the visual.

This renewed interest in visual methodology is positioned within a wider epistemological shift, from a ‘linguistic turn’—the final series of turns in the history of philosophy outlined by the American philosopher Richard Rorty—to a ‘visual turn’ or what University of Chicago professor of art W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) dubbed a ‘pictorial turn’, the idea that challenges language as paradigmatic for meaning. He notes:

...one might identify it with phenomenology’s inquiry into imagination and visual experience; or with Derrida’s ‘grammatology’, which de-centers the ‘phonocentric’ model of language by shifting attention to the visible, material traces of writing; or with the Frankfurt School’s investigations of modernity, mass culture, and visual media; or with Michel Foucault’s insistence on a history and theory of power/knowledge that exposes the rift between the discursive and the ‘visible’, the seeable and the sayable, as the crucial faultline in ‘scopic regimes’ of modernity (1995, pp. 11-13).

Callahan (2015) takes this concept of a ‘visual turn’ and presents it as a new methodology in international relations discourse. Within a journalistic frame, it is not a stretch to assert therefore that Callahan’s assertion can be taken further to argue that vision should be an equal partner in the meaning-making of trans-border reportage.

Such duality of the textual and visual in meaning-making then, suggests the image can not only be studied, analysed and explained through text, but sit alongside text in the academic analysis of reality. It can then be posited, that a theorisation of the journalistic interpretation of the ‘reality’ of refugee migration need not be presented as a purely textual analysis, as is tradition, but through a composite of textual and visual elements.

Positioned within a wide range of academic studies that explore journalism praxis and research (Bacon, 2006, 2012; Nash, 2013; Lindgren & Phillips 2011; Robie, 2015; Robie & Marbrook, 2020), this article will harness this visual dialogue within a journalistic practice-led research paradigm to explore the nexus between the refugee and asylum-seeker protests in Brisbane's Kangaroo Point and Australia's colonial past and the polymorphic borders of its neo-colonial present.

Refugee migration and Australian immigration detention

The refugee protests in Brisbane began when a group of refugees stepped out onto a balcony overlooking Route 15 to Storey Bridge on 2 April 2020, holding handwritten pleas for freedom. The protest would last from 2 April 2020 to 14 April 2021, ebbing, flowing and morphing from a balcony protest to an around-the-clock-blockade and variously traffic-stopping rallies and night-time vigils. But the root of the protests runs deeper, through two decades of oppressive refugee policies to a bedrock of what Australian historian Humphrey McQueen (2004) calls Australia's sub-imperialist mindset.

Most of the 120 men locked up in the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention, sought asylum in Australia after the second Rudd government took the hardline position of refusing to settle any asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat. Some missed the deadline by mere days, others were already at sea when the Prime Ministerial edict was issued. With their boats intercepted, the asylum seekers were first sent to the Australian external territory of Christmas Island and from there to Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The result was eight agonising years of immigration purgatory.

But the government had good reason to believe the position was both popularly supported and politically advantageous. Markus and Arunachalam note '... while there is majority support for the right to seek asylum, in response to questions on boat arrivals strong negative views outnumber the strong positive by more than two to one' (2018). The Lowy Institute's Munro and Oliver (2019) noted '(i)n 2018, large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into Australia' was seen as a critical threat by 40 percent of Australians, essentially unchanged from the previous time the question had been asked in 2009 when it was 39 percent'. Studies of public attitudes towards people seeking asylum in Australia suggest they are often labelled as 'illegal immigrants', 'queue jumpers', 'bogus' refugees and 'economic migrants' (Gelber, 2003; Every & Augoustinos, 2008; Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014; McKay et al., 2012).

While media representation is not exclusively responsible for public opinion of refugee migration, a significant number of studies show public perceptions are shaped though media coverage (McKay, 2012). These negative perspectives are mirrored in the media coverage where the portrayal is either overwhelmingly negative (Bleiker et al., 2013, O'Doherty and Lecouteur 2007; Pickering 2001,

Saxton, 2003), or polarised (Lippi, 2020). These narratives while negative, are also rather limiting in contextualising refugee migration both within the reality and complexities of trans-border migration and the wider geo-politics of imagining, nations, sovereignty, 'us' and 'them'.

Within the Australian context this identity formation, the inclusion, exclusion and even the presentation of offshore detention as a solution, can be viewed through what McQueen (2004) calls Australia's sub-imperialism.

Cognisant of this wider framing and the limited depth of analytical reportage of refugee migration in the mainstream media, this article posits a photojournalism-centric visual storytelling methodology, is able to produce a counterhegemonic narrative of refugee migration, situating Australia's treatment of refugees within largely subterranean colonial and neo-colonial thinking that has prevailed throughout much of Australia's history. It also argues the media framing of refugee migration needs to be represented as a transborder issue across multiple polymorphic borders, challenging the Australian government's hegemonic representation of the border as an omnipotent and uniform structure perfectly defining the edges of Australia.

Kangaroo Point protests

On 13 July 2019, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared that no asylum seeker arriving by boat would be settled in Australia. From this point on, those people would be referred to as 'transitory persons', and their stay would be considered by the government to be temporary. Who exactly this affected is difficult to ascertain as demographic data on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia's various detention centres is not easily accessible and even at a political level there is often little transparency, with only select data released through avenues such as Senate Estimates hearings. For example, in response to a question from Greens Senator Nick McKim, the Immigration and Border Protection Portfolio noted on 29 March 2017, that

(B)etween 19 July 2013 and the last boat arrival on 27 July 2014, 79 boats arrived in Australia. There has not been a boat arrival in more than 950 days. Of the individuals on board, 1,596 were transferred to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, 1,523 were transferred to the Manus Regional Processing Centre and 1,414 were issued with bridging visas in Australia.

The decision to grant bridging visas for some and not others was explained away as the Minister exercising his 'non-delegable personal power'. The process remains opaque, and the resultant statistics are stripped of even the most basic of humanising, demographic information. This bureaucratic dehumanisation is reflected in the lived experiences of the asylum seekers themselves.

An Iranian refugee who was sent from Christmas Island to Manus and from

there to Kangaroo Point said ‘the Australian government did everything they could not to refer to us as refugees or asylum seekers. I was “a client” in Christmas Island, “the transferee” on Manus Island, “a resident” after the Supreme Court ruling, and a “detainee” at Kangaroo Point’. The ruling refers to the 2016 PNG Supreme Court decision that declared the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island, under arrangement with Australia, a breach of the refugees’ right to personal liberty under the Papua New Guinea Constitution.

Most of the men in offshore detention were eventually acknowledged as official refugees. But the conservative Liberal governments of Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison continued their Labor predecessor’s policy and have refused to settle even those with official refugee status. Instead, they have been offered ongoing limbo or an excruciatingly slow settlement process in the US under a deal to swap Australian refugees with US refugees.

Nonetheless, the Australian government still had responsibility for the detainees, which included provision of medical care. However, lengthy delays in the medical evacuation regime, led to calls for a new framework, paving the way for Independent MP Dr Kerryn Phelps to introduce the Medevac Bill to parliament. On 1 March 2019, Medevac became law authorising doctors to make medical rulings to evacuate refugees and asylum seekers detained on Manus and Nauru to Australia for urgent medical treatment. By the time the Law was repealed on 8 December 2019, 192 detainees had been evacuated under the legislation (Kaldor Centre, 2020). The problem was, the refugees who had been transferred to Australia for medical treatment had not been granted a visa authorising entry, so they were placed in detention—primarily at the Kangaroo Point APoD, and Melbourne’s Park Hotel APoD.

And so it was that 120 Medevac refugees were locked in at the Kangaroo Point APoD when Queensland entered a hard COVID lockdown on April 2, 2020.

Offshore detention and Australia’s sub-imperialism:

In his provocative analysis of Australia’s birth as a nation, *A New Britannia*, McQueen (2004) argues that for much of Australia’s history, the colonists who occupied the continent as an outpost of the British Empire have in return, viewed the neighbouring Pacific region though Australia’s own version of a ‘Monroe Doctrine’, exhibiting sub-imperial tendencies first as a group of pre-federation British colonies and later as federated neo-colonialists—where the colonial dominion of the Pacific shifted from Britain to Australia.

Tod Moore’s (2015) study of liberal imperialist thought in Australia as expressed though the Imperial Federation League and the friends and associates of Protectionist and later Liberal Party Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, presents an image of an Australia imagining itself as member of federated empire. Thompson’s (1972) critique of the Australian Labor Party and Australian imperialism suggest similar sentiments

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"We were told the people in this part of PNG were cannibals, and apparently they were told we were dangerous criminals. I guess it is typical colonial divide and conquer."

Austral



Between July 19, 2013 and July 27, 2014 Australia sent 1523 refugees to a small Island off its former colony of Papua New Guinea and a further 1596 to its former colonial protectorate of Nauru....

Figure 1: 'I miss my wife and son. They are in community.'

Always was always will be
Aboriginal land...



The penal colony may have moved from Quendaunooka land to Jagers land, but the colonial ethos of using incarceration to break people continues...



Queensland was initially occupied by the British because Earl Bathurst, Colonial Secretary in Lord Liverpool's conservative British government believed transportation to Nsao was no longer an effective deterrent to the 'criminal class'



Figure 2: 'Always was always will be Aboriginal land ...'

on the other side of the political divide, albeit with some xenophobic reservations. He notes that while the Victorian Labor party organ *The Tocsin* feared imperialism would only benefit a few ‘fatmen’, Brisbane’s *The Worker* and Sydney’s *The Australian Worker* feared the implications of access to a cheap ‘black’ workforce—and warned against the threat of ‘black New Guinean labour sully the purity of white Australia’ (Thompson, 1972, p. 27).

Labor’s xenophobia against the New Guineans, however, did not temper Australia’s or (prior to federation) Queensland’s sub-imperial designs on Papua New Guinea. As far back as 1883 Queensland pastoralist Premier Thomas McIlwraith had unilaterally attempted to annex eastern New Guinea to Queensland by raising the British flag in Port Moresby (Jacobs, 1952, p111; McQueen, 2004, p. 15); and by 1919, a now federated Australia formally annexed New Guinea under the Treaty of Versailles. In short, the Australian policy of sub-imperialism centred around securing dominion over New Guinea, while maintaining the ethnic purity of White Australia (O’Brien, 2009).

The Australian colonisation of Nauru runs along similar lines to that of its colonisation of Papua New Guinea, the only difference being New Zealand’s sub-imperialism joining forces with Australian and British dominion of the tiny phosphorous-rich Pacific nation.

While Papua New Guinea was granted independence from Australia in 1975 under the Whitlam government, many analysts argue the ‘master-servant’ relationship continued long after independence (Ritchie, 2013).

Australian foreign aid – official development assistance as a percentage of gross national income—has been steadily declining for decades. Development Policy Institute’s Robin Davies (2017) notes that Australia’s highest ratio of aid to Gross National Income (GNI) was 0.48 percent under Prime Ministers Holt, McEwen and Gorton. Davies’ argues, the much-publicised figure of 0.65 percent under Whitlam is based on inaccurate OECD data. Either way Australian aid as a percentage of GNI has today reached an all-time low—just 0.24 percent under John Howard between 2000-04, and even lower under the Abbot-Turnbull government at 0.22 percent in 2016. Aid further fell to a record low of 0.21 percent under Morrison in 2019-20, and while it marginally recovered in the following financial year, creeping up to 0.22 percent, it is estimated to dip below 0.20 percent in 2022-23.

Despite this downward trajectory of foreign aid, Australia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Papua New Guinea and the Pacific specifically have remained largely unchanged, with PNG becoming the largest recipient of Australian Aid in 2015-16 (Lowey Institute, 2016). While aid is most welcome and needed in the region, the ‘pork barrelling’ is seen by some analysts as an extension of Australian neo-colonialism, where aid is provided in exchange for PNG’s role in allowing the redirection and detention of people seeking asylum in Australia.

This complex asymmetric partnership with Nauru and Papua New Guinea is central in framing and mediating the political reality of contemporary refugee migration, where Australia continues to use its former colonies in the Pacific, now tethered though the promise of ongoing foreign aid, as a buffer against irregular refugee migration into Australia.

Polymorphic borders

The selective immigration that has long been a hallmark of a white Australian immigration policy may no longer be as aggressive as it used to be, but it is nearly impossible to view Australia's response to irregular migration without reference to a culture of immigration discrimination. The visual representation of such an idea is intrinsically linked with the notion of understanding national borders as polymorphic, in that they not only are porous to some and impervious to others, but also shift and morph depending on who tries to cross.

Parochial political posturing has long tried to embed the notion of a robust and continuous border circling the continent, but the reality is there is no singular line to cross or marker buoy to pass to enter Australia—it remains contextual. A sailor entering Australian waters on luxury yacht can legally land on Queensland's northern beaches and be, for all intents and purposes, in Australia. Yet thanks to a 16 May 2013 legal device that excised virtually all of Australia's shoreline from the mainland for irregular migration purposes—a refugee arrival by boat landing on the same beach will never be considered to have set down in Australia.

In their introduction to *Territory, Politics and Governance's* special issue on Polymorphic Borders, Burridge et al. (2017) say contemporary border studies describe state borders to be far more fragmented and chaotic than represented in traditional narrative of state borders whereby they are often defined as 'coherent, monstrous, omnipotent and omniscient', and are fixed and immovable. They write:

Rather than being either strictly tied to the territorial margins of the states or ubiquitous throughout the entire territory of states, bordering takes on a variety of forms, agents, sites, practices and targets. We propose reconceptualising borders as polymorphic, or taking on a multiplicity of mutually non-exclusive forms at the same time. (2017, p. 239)

Such a concept of borders is particularly relevant in the mediated representation of the refugee crisis—where the men on the balcony physically standing inside a suburban hotel in Brisbane, Australia, are in many ways still positioned outside of Australia, somewhere in limbo between their last location on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and their next destination which remains as of yet unknown. This reimagining of the nature of borders is also significant in understanding and challenging the 'stronger borders' rhetoric of successive Australian governments.



The Australian border, like its colonial Dominion is anything but uniform...

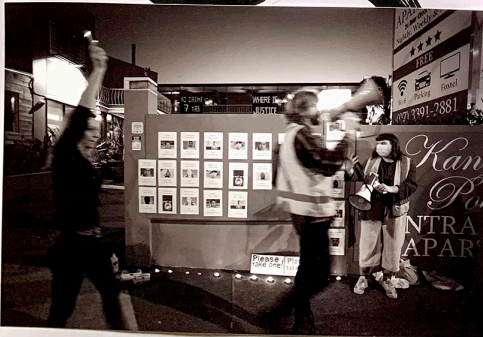
The Australian border for asylum-seekers coming by boat: Australia's outer Islands of Ashmore, Cartier, Christmas and Cocos continue to be part of Aust. territory but outside its migration zone...

On May 14, 2013 the labor gov't excised the entire main-land from the Aust migration zone to people coming by boat.

The Australian Border for Asylum-seekers coming by Plane:

A person may arrive at the Brisbane airport on a tourist visa by plane, then seek asylum in Aust, and be issued a bridging visa until their application is processed.

But people coming from countries like Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iran are less likely to get a tourist visa into Australia.



The Australian Border for the KP120:

The boundary wall of Kangaroo H-Central Hotel apartment, 721 Main St, Kangaroo Pt, QLD.

Figure 3: 'The Australian border, like its dominion, is anything but uniform.'



Saif's border:

Saif's wife Sabbeh was allowed to come to Australia with their young child Sammi for medical treatment when Sammi was few months old - more than three years ago....

Saif himself was finally allowed on to mainland Australia for his own medical treatment under Medevac in 2019.



But Saif was detained at the KPAPad, and not allowed to live with his wife and son, living in the community just seems away....

Figure 4: 'Saif's border: where is justice?'

Conclusion

The mediated representation of the refugee migration reality in Australia can be situated within two interlocking meta-narratives, that of Australia's sub-imperialism and neo-colonialism, and the polymorphic nature of the border that it creates. Such a narrative challenges the political media hegemony of a strong border which is unified and omnipotent, instead of one that is largely contextual and conditional upon who tries to cross it.

The reach of Australia's new colonial dominion and the nature of its polymorphic border within that context is central in understanding the mediated reality of refugee migration in general, and the story of refugees who were detained at the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention in particular. Such a reading positions Brisbane's refugee protest as a localised border-war wherein the walls and wire of the hotel complex is an extension of the Australian border which is porous for some but impervious to others. The war wages between those with unfettered access, those trapped behind and collaborators escaping their own lockdowns to show solidarity.

The interplay between text and images in allows for a more comprehensive narrative of this reality that negotiates between the micro and macro elements of the narrative where the macro conceptualisation of refugee migration with in Australia's neo-colonial setting can simultaneously incorporate the micro narratives that humanise individual refugees.

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