

The Aesthetics of Resistance in Australian-run immigration Detention Centres on Manus Island:
The Case Study of Behrouz Boochani

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

The offshore detention regime for asylum seekers represents a contested model of border control, punishing those seeking refuge and violating their fundamental rights. This research, however, reveals a powerful counterpoint: the use of art and creativity as tools of resistance by detainees. Through the story of Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian-Kurdish journalist and former Manus Island detainee, this study illuminates the power of art and creativity in challenging this system. Despite his lengthy confinement, Boochani produced a remarkable body of creative work that exposed the harsh realities of detention, creating a counter-narrative that gained international acclaim. This research introduces creativity as a tool for political activism, challenging the invisibility inherent in offshore detention. The concept of ‘creative subjectivation’; is presented as an analytical framework to understand how creative practices facilitate the transformation of marginalized refugees into active political subjects. To explore this, the study investigates the structural, operational, and experiential dimensions of offshore detention, from macro-level border policies to micro-level dynamics within detention centers. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with Boochani, his creative collaborators, journalists, human rights advocates, and former detainees, this study provides a multifaceted perspective on creative resistance within highly restrictive spaces of border enforcement. The dissertation comprises seven chapters that explore themes of border politics, the evolution of Australia’s offshore detention policies, the lived experiences within detention centers, and the transformative potential of creative resistance and includes the production of a documentary film that offers an immersive and sensorial exploration of creative resistance and migrant activism within the offshore detention regime. This project contributes to critical migration and border studies by illuminating the transformative potential of creative resistance in contexts of extreme marginalization. It offers new insights into refugee agency, migrant politics, border politics, and the role of art in contesting anti-asylum policies and practices.

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Dedication

To the Unfinished Life of Reza Barati

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Introduction

The offshore detention regime, widely criticized by human rights organizations, advocacy groups, and international bodies, represents a punitive and exclusionary model of border control and migration governance deployed by Global-North states to restrict the right to asylum. Masked as a humanitarian measure, the offshore model of refugee governance enforces policies of exclusion by legitimizing detention, restricting asylum rights, and externalizing border controls to circumvent international obligations. This model relies on securitization and humanitarianism as mutually reinforcing paradigms that justify exclusionary policies under the pretense of protection. While securitization frames asylum seekers as potential threats, humanitarianism constructs hierarchies of deservingness, determining who is seen as a ‘genuine’ refugee based on selective moral and political criteria (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2016). These intertwined logics result in brutal strategies that impose severe physical and psychological harm upon asylum seekers, punishing them solely for seeking protection and undermining the right to asylum as a fundamental human right grounded in international law (Mountz, 2020). These intertwined logics produce racialized, punitive, and deterrence-based strategies that subject asylum seekers to systematic physical and psychological harm, undermining the fundamental human right to seek asylum (Mountz, 2020). These rights rooted in international law, particularly the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, guarantee individuals fleeing persecution the right to request asylum and protection, irrespective of where or when their displacement takes place.

In recent decades, border control practices have intensified globally, with states deploying new technologies, legal barriers, and third-party mechanisms to regulate and restrict human mobility. The bordering practices of our time, although rooted in historical projects of

coloniality (Khosravi, 2019), have evolved into multiscalar and complex assemblages of state authorities, military forces, private security firms, and international organizations (Andreas & Snyder, 2000; Szary & Giraut, 2015). No longer confined to territorial edges, these borders extend into institutional and social realms, producing differentiated forms of exclusion based on race, class, gender, and citizenship status (Anderson, 2017; De Genova, 2010; Fakhoury, 2021). They are not merely sites of restriction but highly contested spaces where migrants resist, negotiate, and reclaim agency.

Modern border regimes increasingly rely on sophisticated technologies of control and surveillance to monitor, deter, and immobilize people on the move (Isleyen, 2021). These mechanisms do not operate in isolation; they are reinforced by politics of fear that frame asylum seekers as security threats, fueling restrictive policies and xenophobic narratives (Sanyal, 2018; Tazzioli, 2018; Walia, 2020). At the same time, administrative barriers (such as prolonged asylum procedures and legal ambiguities) exacerbate precarity, making access to protection increasingly difficult (Tazzioli, 2018; Ilcan et al., 2018). Offshore detention centers epitomize these trends, functioning as tools of deterrence that externalize state responsibility while subjecting asylum seekers to indefinite confinement, forced deportation, and systemic marginalization (McNevin & Missbach, 2018; Mountz, 2020). Australia's offshore detention regime, despite its obligations under 1951 Convention and international law, operates as a system of deterrence designed to block asylum seekers arriving by boat from reaching the mainland and lodging refugee claims. By outsourcing detention to remote Pacific islands, the Australian government evades legal accountability while confining asylum seekers to indefinite limbo under the mask of 'processing' their claims. This extraterritorial system, sustained through contracts with private security firms (Rae, Holman & Nethery, 2018), strategically shifts the

burden of care while reinforcing the racialized and punitive logic of border enforcement (Boochani, 2023a). The lack of transparent legislation and restricted media access to Australia's offshore detention sites, particularly Manus Island and Nauru, not only obscured the conditions within these centers but also shielded the government from accountability, reinforcing the systemic marginalization and legal precarity of asylum seekers (Nethery & Holman, 2016).

Despite its punitive design, offshore detention is not merely a site of victimization; it is also a terrain of resistance. Refugees and asylum seekers actively challenge the conditions imposed on them, asserting agency through acts of defiance, creative expression, and collective organizing (Long, 2001). As Ilcan et al. (2024) argue, restrictive border regimes are not impenetrable; they are continuously contested by the very people they seek to immobilize. Offshore detention centers, while intended to deter and silence, have paradoxically become sites of political contestation, as demonstrated in this study of Manus. Detainees transform spaces of confinement into spaces of solidarity, advocacy, and creative activism. Offshore detention centers, while intended to deter and silence, paradoxically became sites of political contestation, as demonstrated in this study of Manus. Detainees transformed spaces of confinement into spaces of solidarity, advocacy, and creative activism. Borders are shaped by and shape the experiences of those who navigate them (Cuttitta et al., 2023), and within offshore detention, asylum seekers continuously resisted the exclusionary policies imposed upon them, redefining these spaces through acts of agency and defiance.

While offshore detention policies aim to strip asylum seekers' political subjectivity, detainees continue to contest and resist the structures imposed upon them. Their acts of defiance, advocacy, and creative expression are not isolated; rather, they align with broader strategies employed by migrants worldwide to navigate restrictive border regimes. As Ilcan et al. (2024)

highlight, migrant resistance takes multiple forms, often emerging within and against restrictive border enforcement. One strategy involves exploiting legal loopholes and irregular crossings, where migrants navigate and subvert formal border controls by using legal ambiguities and unofficial routes (Achiri & Klem, 2024; Samuel, 2018). Others engage in resistance within spaces of waiting, transforming temporary asylum-processing sites into arenas for social connection, collective action, and political advocacy (Kreichauf, 2021; Kallio et al., 2021). Many migrants participate in the formation of rights and justice groups, building grassroots networks to challenge injustices, advocate for legal protections, and promote social change (Ilcan, 2013; Ataç et al., 2021; Dagtas & Can, 2022). Advocacy also extends beyond these networks, as migrant rights movements mobilize against restrictive border policies, campaigning for safe mobility and equitable treatment (Basok & Candiz, 2020; Libal & Harding, 2022). In some cases, resistance takes the form of repurposing spaces, where detention centers and refugee camps are transformed into sites of cultural exchange, education, and artistic expression (Berg & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Olivius & Hedström, 2023). Lastly, migrants engage in counter-political imaginaries, constructing alternative narratives that challenge dominant border discourses, redefine exclusionary policies, and frame borders as sites of solidarity and connection rather than control (Ticktin, 2022). These strategies underscore the ways in which migrants, despite restrictive conditions, actively contest and reshape the border regimes that seek to immobilize them.

Building upon these insights, this research positions art and creativity as crucial enablers of migrant politics, offering pathways for resistance, solidarity, and social change (Kilcoyne, 2018). Art empowers asylum seekers and refugees to reclaim agency and voice in contexts where their rights and identities are frequently suppressed (Hughes, 2018; Khorana, 2022). By transforming detention sites into spaces of resistance and solidarity, artistic expressions

challenge dominant discourses while fostering community resilience and collective action (Jeffery et al., 2019). As Rancière (2009) argues, art's transformative power lies in its ability to disrupt established power structures and inspire new political imaginaries. Whether through advocacy networks (Basok & Candiz, 2020; Libal & Harding, 2022), repurposing detention spaces (Berg & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Olivius & Hedström, 2023), or redefining borders as sites of solidarity (Ticktin, 2022), creative interventions subvert exclusionary regimes. Behrouz Boochani's creative activism on Manus Island can affirm how literature, film, and journalism serve as tools of resistance, reclaiming voice and agency within sites of confinement (Boochani, 2023a).

Building on the discussion of offshore detention and resistance, this study explores how creative subjectivation enables asylum seekers to reclaim agency and challenge oppressive regimes. Rather than viewing refugees as passive victims of state control, this research highlights the ways in which they actively contest their marginalization through artistic and creative interventions. The concept of 'creative subjectivation' proposed by this research as a key analytical tool involves a transformative process wherein marginalized refugees reclaim political identity and agency through art and creative interventions, resisting the dehumanizing logic of detention. As Rancière (2009) argues, art possesses a disruptive power capable of unsettling established hierarchies and fostering alternative political imaginaries. In this context, creative activism is more than mere expression; it functions as a strategic response to restrictive border enforcement, enabling asylum seekers to subvert oppressive policies and mobilize for social change.

My research provides insights into the aesthetics of resistance and the ways art and creative interventions were mobilized in the context of Australia's offshore detention. To do so, I

build upon the phenomenal journey and creative activism of Behrouz Boochani, an acclaimed Iranian-Kurdish journalist, writer, filmmaker, and former detainee of Manus Prison, who endured prolonged offshore detention and left behind numerous enduring creative works that exposed the nature of the offshore detention system. The individual and collective resistance of detainees like Boochani has not only highlighted offshore facilities as sites of political struggle and demands for justice but also reinforced their significance as platforms for refugee advocacy.

Who is Behrouz Boochani?

Boochani's remarkable journey, characterized by prolonged detention offshore, has created an enduring legacy that exposes the nature of the offshore detention system. Connecting Boochani's journey to this research's focus on creative activism within anti-asylum regimes offers valuable insights. His creative activism has not only challenged the status quo but also emphasized the significance of art in transcending the harsh realities faced by asylum seekers. By delving into the specifics of Boochani's journey, I aim to explore the role of artistic expression in navigating antiasylum and oppressive border regimes. Connecting Boochani's narrative to the key theme and question of this research, this study offers a real-world context for the theoretical concepts explored throughout the chapters.

Boochani's Background and Early Career

Behrouz Boochani was born on July 19, 1983, in Ilam, a Kurdish-populated city in western Iran and a key front during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). At the age of 18, Boochani migrated to Tehran to attend university and obtained his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from two prestigious universities in Iran's capital. He earned his bachelor's degree in Human Geography from Tarbiat Moallem University and graduated from Tarbiat Modares University

with a master's degree in Political Geography. During his years of study at the university, Boochani collaborated as a freelancer journalist with several reputable media outlets in Iran, primarily covering Middle East politics, minority rights, and the preservation of Kurdish culture (Melbourne University, 2015 November 19).

Boochani co-founded, edited, and published Werya, a Kurdish magazine advocating for Kurdish cultural and political rights (Melbourne University, 2015 November 19). Due to Werya's political content, Iranian authorities closely monitored Boochani, viewing his work as a threat. His affiliations with the banned Kurdish Democratic Party and the National Union of Kurdish Students heightened scrutiny (Doherty, 2015 Nov 14th). On February 17, 2013, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) raided Werya's offices in Ilam, arresting 11 of Boochani's colleagues (Doherty, 2015 Nov 14th). Fearing persecution, Boochani went into hiding for over two months before fleeing Iran.

Fleeing Iran and confinement on Manus

On May 23, 2013, Boochani left Iran for Indonesia, intending to seek asylum in Australia (Doherty, 2015 Nov 14th). His first attempt failed when his boat sank, but he survived with the help of a fishing vessel that returned him to Indonesia (Boochani, 2018a). In July 2013, during his second attempt, the Royal Australian Navy intercepted the vessel. He was initially detained on Christmas Island before being transferred to Manus Prison (officially known as the Manus Regional Processing Centre but referred to in this study as Manus Prison or Manus Detention Centre to avoid the bureaucratic language of Australia's immigration regime), following Australia's newly amended legislation that permanently barred asylum seekers arriving by boat from settling in the country. While Boochani was at sea, the Australian government introduced

new legislation permanently barring asylum seekers arriving by boat (labeled ‘irregular maritime arrivals’) from ever settling in the country (MC, 2023 February the 9th). This policy, part of Australia’s Pacific Solution II, sought to intercept and detain asylum seekers arriving by boat offshore, preventing them from lodging claims on Australian soil. Manus Island was designated as a detention site specifically for single male refugees, a practice examined in detail in Chapter Four

Boochani remained imprisoned on Manus from 2013 until its official closure in 2017. In 2016, the PNG Supreme Court ruled that conditions in the Manus detention center violated the country’s constitution (Doherty, Davidson & Karp, 2016, April 26), leading to its closure. However, Boochani was forced to remain in PNG, eventually relocating to Port Moresby in September 2019 (Doherty, Davidson & Karp, 2016 April, 26th).

On November 14, 2019, after years of confinement and limited mobility, Boochani finally managed to leave Papua New Guinea, arriving in Christchurch on a one-month visa to participate in a special event organized by WORD Christchurch on November 29 (Doherty, 2019 November 15th). Boochani remained in New Zealand after his visa expired, seeking asylum, and was finally granted refugee status a few months later in July 2020. (Doherty, 2020 July, 23rd). After gaining his freedom from Australia's offshore detention regime, Boochani settled in Wellington, New Zealand, where he continues his work as a writer, journalist, academic, and advocate.

Resistance Through Journalism and Art

Despite the severe restrictions imposed on detainees, Manus Prison was not only a site of depot and detention of asylum seekers. Manus became a space where asylum seekers found ways to

resist, document, and expose the realities of offshore detention. From the very beginning of his incarceration, Boochani sought to challenge the system by establishing connections with journalists and human rights advocates, using every available means to bear witness to the conditions inside. He operated as an imprisoned journalist, reporting on the abuses within the camp despite the risks involved.

He carried out this endeavor using his limited and unreliable weekly dial-up internet allocation. Based on my interviews with Boochani, he successfully smuggled a mobile phone inside the camp by offering bribes to local prison staff. With this device, he managed to expand his communication with the outside world. Initially, Boochani provided information to the media from inside the prison as an 'anonymous source,' as disclosing his identity could have posed risks to his safety (Doherty, 2023). However, in 2016, with the publication of his article in *The Guardian* titled 'This is Manus Island, My Prison, My Torture, My Humiliation,' Boochani publicly disclosed his real identity and began speaking openly about the events he had witnessed as his time in prison grew longer.

Boochani made contact with human rights advocates and journalists beyond the detention camp. He documented and bore witness to the human rights violations within the camp, writing of journalistic articles that he discreetly transmitted via a mobile phone. These articles detailed the prison conditions and exposed the structures of oppression to media outlets and advocacy organizations outside, including [The Guardian](#), [Saturday Paper](#), [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Financial Times](#), [New Matilda](#), and through his [Twitter](#) account (which has renamed to X these days). Boochani's prison- writings published later as part of an edited book in 2023 (Boochani, 2023a) combined articles from experts and scholars on migration, asylum rights, refugee politics, and literature. Boochani's journalism played role as "both a cry for

justice, and an anatomy of a brutal prison system designed to strip its inmates of their identity" (Zable, 2022).

Beyond journalism, Boochani turned to literature as a form of resistance. He wrote his acclaimed memoir, *No Friends, But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, on a smuggled phone in Farsi during the first four years of detention on Manus. The publication of his book, along with the subsequent series of successes and awards it received, turned Boochani into a prominent public figure in Australia. In both prose and poetry, the book narrates Boochani's journey by boat from Indonesia, his detention on Manus Island, and the experiences, including life and death of fellow detainees (Boochani, 2018). The book also provides insights into the Australian guards and the local Papuan community. Boochani tapped the entire book on WhatsApp using his smuggled mobile phone. He was sending his writings to Moones Mansoubi in Australia, who played a pivotal role as a reliable intermediary and translator for some of his work. Mansoubi meticulously organized and transmitted these writings to Omid Tofighian, the book's translator (Mansoubi, 2023). I have engaged in conversations with both Moones and Omid as part of my research on this subject.

Boochani's memoir, which achieved multiple accolades following its publication in 2018 (Behrouz Boochani, n.d.), including Victorian Premier's Literary Prize for Literature 2019. He also received the Special Award at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Australian Book Industry Award for Nonfiction Book of the Year, and the National Biography Prize. This internationally renowned book has been translated into 18 languages across 23 countries and is presently undergoing adaptations for both stage and screen (Behrouz Boochani, n.d.).

Boochani also turned to filmmaking. He co-directed a feature-length documentary film titled "Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time," which was released in 2017 with the Iranian-Dutch

filmmaker Arash Kamali Sarvestani. The entire film was clandestinely shot by Boochani over a span of six months within the prison camp, using only a smartphone ([Galbraith, 2019](#)). The film was created by sharing voice messages and the clips shot in the camp between the co-directors through WhatsApp Messenger ([Kamali Sarvestani, 2019](#)) Arash is also involved in this study as a participant. The film had its worldwide premiere at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2017 ([Behrouz Boochani, n.d.](#)), where it secured the third-place position in the Audience Award for Best Documentary category.

Beyond literature, journalism and film, Boochani collaborated on various artistic and multimedia projects that further amplified his advocacy. One notable collaboration was the Manus theater, a play developed with Tehran-based theater director Nazanin Sahamizadeh, who is also a participant in this study. Boochani worked closely with her to create this verbatim play, which was based on the narratives of eight asylum seekers held in Australia's offshore detention centers on Manus and Nauru. The play received significant acclaim during its initial run in Tehran in March 2017 before later being staged in Bangladesh and Adelaide, Australia, in 2019 ([Sebag-Montefiore, 2019, March 9](#)) ([Sebag-Montefiore, 2019 March, 9th](#)).

In another distinct artistic endeavor, Boochani collaborated with Iranian-born Australian photographer Hoda Afshar, serving as an associate producer for the video installation *Remain*. This powerful visual piece, which was exhibited at the Australian Museum for Contemporary Art in 2018 ([Oxford Faculty of Law, n.d.](#)), depicted the lived experiences of detainees on Manus. Hoda Afshar, who is also involved in this study, shared valuable insights about her collaboration with Boochani and the artistic process behind the project.

Additionally, Boochani contributed to various multimedia projects, expanding his resistance efforts through film, illustration, and investigative journalism. Boochani collaborated

on Ties that Bind and Fray (Cave, 2017 February 8th) for The New York Times, featured on the documentary "Dying for a Better Life" (Prince, 2015) with the BBC, co-created Until We Are All Free: A Graphic Novel (Mankiewicz, 2018) with Alex Mankiewicz, and presented on the short film Nowhere Line: Voices from Manus Island (Schrack, 2016) by Lukas Schrank captured Boochani's extensive conversations while detained on Manus. Behrouz, also, collaborated with Australian filmmaker Simon V Kurian in making two feature-length documentary films, Stop the Boats (Kurian, 2018) and Behrouz (Kurian, 2022), about Manus and Boochani's journey of resistance journey.

Boochani's activism extends beyond conventional forms of resistance. By engaging with multiple artistic mediums, he not only bore witness to the suffering inflicted by Australia's offshore detention system but also mobilized international attention, reshaping narratives surrounding asylum seekers and border politics. Boochani transformed different means of artistic expression into a political tool that subverts state narratives and challenges the very foundations of Australia's offshore detention regime. By working across a range of creative forms, Boochani was able to reach wider audiences, compelling them to confront the harsh contradictions of border politics and revealing how exclusionary state policies rely on legal loopholes and bureaucratic control. In doing so, Boochani's activism is both cultural and political, unsettling the boundaries of who has the right to include and whose voices are heard and validated.

Boochani and his human right advocacy

Beyond his creative contributions, Boochani has played an important role as a human rights defender, facilitating access to information and assisting various organizations with legal cases, reports, and petitions. He maintains regular communication with several prominent

organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, OHCHR, PEN International, Reporters Sans Frontieres, Refugee Council of Australia, and the Human Rights Law Centre in Australia. Additionally, Boochani maintains active connections with grassroots advocacy groups in Australia. He has collaborated extensively with organizations like the Refugee Action Coalition, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and Refugee Rights Action Network WA. Notably, his long-standing partnership with the Refugee Action Coalition and Writing Through Fences has been ongoing for several years. Boochani's involvement in legal cases has been significant. He served as one of the Applicants in a class action lawsuit against the Papua New Guinea government, challenging the legality of the indefinite and continuous imprisonment of refugees on Manus Island. Working closely with lawyer Ben Lomai in Port Moresby, Boochani collected signatures, explained legal processes to other detainees, and prepared the case. The efforts eventually led to success, as on April 26, 2016, the PNG Supreme Court ruled that the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was unconstitutional and unlawful (Doherty, Davidson and Karp, 2016 April 26th).

Research Questions

This study unpacks the connections between aesthetics and politics within the context of immigration offshore detention. More specifically, it explores the role of artistic and creative acts of resistance in Australian-run offshore detention centers on Manus Island, with a particular focus on the narrative of Behrouz Boochani. Within a detention system deliberately designed to render individuals invisible, erode agency, and subjugate refugees, this research investigates how creative resistance, art, and literature function as tools for reclaiming political subjectivity. This unfolds explores both the possibilities and limitations of art in reflecting refugee experiences and

examines how artistic mobilizations challenge the power structures, procedures, and tactics of sovereignty that undermine migrant agency and subjectivity.

Responding to the calls for troubling vertical politics and top-down refugee regimes that immobilize the political agency of asylums and refugees (Ilcan, Oliver, & Connoy, 2017; Rozakou, 2016; Ticktin, 2016), this study sheds light on a form of alternative, horizontal politics. Drawing inspiration from the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (See for example Rancière 2004, 2010), this research underscores the role of art as a site of contention, visibility, and resistance, where political activism emerges through creative expression.

To explore these themes, the research addresses two central questions:

- 1- How, and through what means, do art and creative interventions contribute to the construction of political subjectivity within the marginalizing spaces of immigration detention?
- 2- What are the key structural and operational components of Australia's offshore detention regime, and how do these underlying layers interact across different levels to shape the environment for resistance and activism among detained asylum seekers?

By examining the lived experience of an asylum seeker who fled persecution only to be incarcerated within a brutal offshore regime, this research contributes to critical debates on citizenship and forced displacement. Amnesty International has documented the targeted mistreatment inflicted on detainees within Australia's offshore detention system (Amnesty International Australia, Dec 11th). Although the offshore facilities on Manus and Nauru have officially closed, the Australian government has preserved the legal framework for 'offshore processing,' signaling a continued erosion of asylum rights. With an average detention period of

689 days (12 times longer than in the United States) Australia holds the highest recorded average for immigration detention worldwide (Knaus and Doherty, 2022 February 16th).

Moreover, the persistence of policies that have left countless refugees in prolonged uncertainty and suffering, alongside recent efforts by other nations (e.g., the UK) to replicate Australia's offshore model (Zhang, 2023), highlights the urgent need for further research. Scholarship on the role of art as a means of political subjectivation in marginalizing spaces of migration has grown in recent years (Martiniello, 2015; Marciniak & Tyler, 2014; Iannelli & Musaró, 2017; Montange, 2017; Rovisco, 2019; Schwartz, 2021; 2022). Artistic expression not only disrupts dominant political orders but also generates alternative spaces of interaction that contest existing power structures. As Rancière (2010) argues, art reconfigures the "distribution of the sensible," offering new possibilities for experience and political engagement.

However, further research is needed to examine successful case studies where art has functioned as a catalyst for refugee activism and political subjectivity in sites of confinement. More importantly, there remains a critical gap in studies that center the perspectives of asylum seekers themselves. Understanding the enactment of political subjectivities in detention, as well as the broader interplay of power, agency, and resistance, can deepen our knowledge of asylum politics. This requires examining refugee activism at the micro, meso, and macro levels, including social networks, legal and policy frameworks, and historical contexts.

The current study analyzes the artistic and creative interventions of detained asylum seekers, situating refugee activism within a broader framework of political subjectivation, revealing how resistance emerges in even the most oppressive conditions.

Methodology

This project employs documentary film as a qualitative methodological approach to collect, analyze, and share the qualitative data gathered for this study. While traditionally underutilized in academic research, documentary filmmaking has increasingly been recognized as a rigorous and effective tool across various disciplines (Iwasaki, 2021, Munro & Bilbrough, 2018; Petrarca & Hughes, 2014). As Khosravi (2018) argued, conventional methodologies often rely on quantitative data and detached observations, fail to capture the emotional landscapes and lived experiences of migrants. Documentary film, with its ability to amplify voices and evoke emotions, offers a way to “scratch the surface” of these experiences (Khosravi, 2018).

A significant shift occurred in the late 20th century in the way images were studied within academia (Desille & Nikielska-Sekula, 2021). This ‘visual turn,’ also known as ‘iconic’ or ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell & Boehm, 2009), challenged linguistic frameworks as the sole means of meaning-making, asserting that images can convey knowledge beyond the limitations of language (Mitchell, 2002; Moxey, 2008). Moxey (2008) expands on this, emphasizing that images do not merely reflect meaning but generate independent interpretations, sometimes even in opposition to text. This recognition has led to an increasing reliance on multisensory tools (such as film) to create a more holistic understanding of social realities.

Visual methodologies have since been widely used in the social sciences to study various phenomena including social interactions, inequalities, migration, and other pressing social issues such as discrimination, marginalization, and human rights violations (Franceschelli & Galip`o, 2021; Friend & Caruthers, 2016; Gregg, R. 2011; Rosenstein, 2002) ethnographic research (Heath et al., 2010; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011), and cross-cultural investigations (Messier, 2019; Zemits et al., 2015). In migration and refugee studies there has been growing interest in

documentary film and other audio-visual methodologies over the recent years. For example, how visual representations of Alan Kurdi's image shaped Western perceptions of refugees, while Briciu (2020) examined how cinematic narratives foster empathy and activism regarding migration crises. Despite these advances, concerns persist regarding the ethical implications of visualizing refugee experiences, with studies exploring how visual methods can potentially reproduce harm or objectification (Brigham & Kharbach, 2020, Hauber-Özer & Call-Cummings, 2020).

Martiniello (2017) argues that when supported by strong theoretical frameworks, visual methods can enrich migration and race studies by offering deeper qualitative insights into the migration process. Integrating images into research dissemination enhances engagement with broader audiences, making research findings more accessible and impactful. Desille and Nikielska-Sekula (2021) outline four key advantages of incorporating visual methodologies in migration studies: Firstly, visuals provide scholars with a means to better situate their studies within concrete geographical, social, and political contexts, challenging stereotypes about migrants and offering more nuanced, humanizing perspectives. Secondly, visual elements can capture and convey diverse migrant experiences, moving beyond the oversimplified, one-dimensional portrayal of migrants as a single, uniform group. Instead, they allow for more detailed and individualized narratives that highlight the complexities and varied realities of migration. Thirdly, adopting visual methodologies enhances opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship, emphasizing the importance of recognizing research participants as active contributors to knowledge creation. A well-executed visual research approach acknowledges migrants as experts of their own lived realities, shifting power dynamics and ensuring that their voices play a central role in shaping the narratives that emerge. Finally, these three advantages

collectively help reshape representations of individuals with migration experiences. Researchers have a responsibility to critically examine how migrants are portrayed, requiring ongoing reflection on power dynamics, their own positionality, subjective interpretations, and ethical considerations throughout the research process.

While images related to migration are abundant in media and the arts, scholars in migration studies tend to be conservative in utilizing images beyond mere illustration, thus failing to fully realize the potential of visuals not just as methods but as an essential methodology and a toolbox for conceptualization and conducting research (Martiniello, 2017). There is a significant gap in the literature of migration and refugee studies for adopting visual methodologies like documentary film (Desille & Nikielska-Sekula, 2021) that presents an opportunity for the further development of visual methodologies, including documentary films, and their application in studying refugees and asylum seekers. This research aims to contribute to this gap by utilizing documentary film as a methodology capable of collecting, analyzing, and representing research findings. The use of documentary film is integrated into three key stages: conceptualization and research design, data collection, and data analysis. The following section is an overview of how documentary film is employed in each of these phases.

Research Design and Conceptualization

When I began my PhD in 2015, the forced and indefinite imprisonment of asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru prisons, was a widely debated issue. Recognizing the urgency and complexity of this issue, I turned to documentary filmmaking as both a methodological approach and an advocacy tool. As a researcher, cinephile, and filmmaker, I saw documentary film as a powerful medium that allowed for both empirical investigation and public engagement. Unlike

conventional textual methods, documentary filmmaking has a greater capacity to expose the hidden realities of offshore detention, challenge its secrecy, and bring visibility to the lived experiences of those subjected to it. My decision to adopt this approach was further driven by the belief that film could serve as a more impactful platform for conveying sensorial experiences (Pink, 2009), making it an effective tool for advocacy and confronting the injustices in Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. Moreover, as a dual Iranian-Canadian citizen, the significant number of Iranians among the detainees on Manus heightened my sense of solidarity with them. This shared cultural and linguistic background fostered deeper connections, which in turn played a crucial role in shaping the film's development.

With documentary filmmaking established as the central methodological pillar, the planning and execution of the study carefully shaped around what data would be collected, analyzed, and communicated. After successfully convincing the university's ethics committee to approve the use of documentary film as the primary methodological strategy for my research, which involved multiple meetings and extensive correspondence, I began designing the research with the key participant in this study, Behrouz Boochani. In fact, my collaboration with him in various stages of this research lent a participatory nature to my work. Boochani not only introduced me to individuals in his network who could provide valuable insights about his creative activism but also played a crucial role in establishing my connections with these individuals. Furthermore, Boochani's active involvement not only shaped the direction of the study but also aligns with participatory research approaches, which emphasize collaboration with marginalized communities in knowledge production.

Data collection

Qualitative interviewing

Qualitative interviewing, particularly the semi-structured approach, is the primary method for data collection in this dissertation. While documentary filmmaking serves as a visual research methodology, in-depth qualitative interviews complement this approach by capturing the voices and perspectives of participants in rich detail. This aligns with the emphasis on lived experiences and subjective meanings within documentary methodology (Rosaldo, 1989). While documentary methodology can encompass a wider range of data sources like archival materials, visual artifacts, audio layers (Stebbins, 2017), qualitative interviews are central to capturing the voices and perspectives of participants (Rosaldo, 1989). Documentary methodology prioritizes understanding the social world through the lens of individual experiences (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2006; Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2018). This approach involves capturing the nuanced and personal stories of individuals to reveal broader social, cultural, and political phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Qualitative interviews are particularly effective within this framework as they allow for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and emotions, providing rich, detailed data that can illuminate complex social realities (Riessman, 2008).

Furthermore, qualitative interviews facilitate a dialogic process, as emphasized by Kvale (2007), where the interviewer and interviewee engage in meaningful exchanges, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject. This interaction, which Rubin, and Rubin (2011) refer to as the 'art of hearing data,' not only enhances the credibility and authenticity of the documentary but also ensures that the participants' viewpoints are accurately represented and respected

(Fontana & Frey, 2005). This collaborative approach in interview, or what Holstein and Gubrium's (2004) coined as the 'active interview,' allows for a richer exploration of the subject.

Scholars like Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero (2018) argue that qualitative in-depth interviews are particularly effective in unpacking the human elements behind statistics, social trends, and policies. This resonates with documentary filmmaker's focus on capturing the living realities of individuals and communities (Rosaldo, 1989). Integrating in-depth interviews within documentary research enhances the ability to capture the motivations, interpretations, and emotions shaping migrants' experiences. In the restrictive environment of offshore detention, where asylum seekers endure prolonged uncertainty and systemic oppression, qualitative interviews serve as a critical tool for documenting lived experiences that would otherwise remain inaccessible (Escárce & Ahearn, 2016). These interviews can reveal the complexities behind statistics and delve into the lived experiences of migrants, revealing the challenges, coping mechanisms, and resilience they demonstrate (Escárce & Ahearn, 2016). Interviews personalize the data by capturing unique stories and perspectives on experiences within detention, providing a nuanced understanding that complements the broader social commentary often embedded in documentary films (Rosaldo, 1989).

What are the layers of data in this research?

The first layer of qualitative data collected for this project consisted of in-depth interviews. Between March 2020 and June 2022, the primary data collection phase involved conducting in-depth, conversational, filmed interviews with participants (see Table 1). A total of 12 individuals were interviewed, including Behrouz Boochani. Apart from my interviews with Boochani, all other interviews were conducted online. While this decision was partly necessitated by COVID-

19 regulations, it also served a narrative function, visually reinforcing Boochani's central role in the film and distinguishing his testimony from those of other participants.

The individuals featured in the film were carefully selected, guided by Boochani's insights. Participants were chosen based on their long-term engagement with Boochani (ranging from three to eight years) and their professional or personal connections with him. More broadly, the participants in this study represent a diverse network of individuals who have played significant roles in either Boochani's advocacy or the broader Manus detention resistance movement. Table 1 provides an overview of the project's participants, including their respective fields of work, the nature of their relationships with Boochani, and the length of time they have known each other.

Out of the twelve participants, nine were Iranian and fluent in Persian. Eight of the interviews were conducted either entirely in Persian (given my native proficiency in the language) or in a bilingual format using both Persian and English, depending on the participants' language preferences. All interviews were transcribed, and those conducted in Persian were translated into English by a bilingual individual. To ensure accuracy, I cross-checked the translated and transcribed texts against the original recordings.

As Table 1 illustrates, some former Manus detainees (see rows 9–11: Mardin, Aref, Shaminda) were among the study's participants. However, their interviews were not included in the visual portion of the project to maintain the clarity and coherence of the film's narrative. While their testimonies were invaluable, I made the editorial decision to focus the film's narrative on Boochani's life and his process of subjectivation. This ensured that the audience remained engaged with the film's central storyline without introducing additional perspectives that might dilute its focus. Nonetheless, the voices of former refugees were essential to shaping

the broader contextual understanding of the offshore detention regime and have been extensively incorporated into the textual portions of this dissertation.

Participant	Field of Work and place of living	Relationship with Boochani	Known since
1- Mounes Mansoubi	community, arts, and cultural development worker based in Australia	the very first translator and collaborator on several journalistic, literary, and academic projects	2013
2- Ben Doherty	journalist, reporter for Guardian Australia based in Australia	collaborator on several journalistic projects	2013
3-Arnold Zable	writer, storyteller, novelist, and human rights advocate based in Australia	collaborator on several literary and literary projects	2014
4- Arash Kamali Sarvestani	filmmaker, director, and producer based in Netherlands Relationship with Boochani: codirector on	codirector of Boochani on making the documentary film Chauka Please Tell Us the Time, and collaborator on Tall	2016

	documentary film Chauka Please Tell Us the Time	Fences, Taller Trees documentary film	
5- Nazanin Sahamizadeh	playwright, director, and researcher based in Iran	collaborator on making the theater production, Manus	2016
6- Omid Tofighian	philosopher, lecturer, translator, and community advocate based in Australia	collaborator in several literary, journalistic, and academic projects including the award- winning book 'No Friends but the Mountains'	2016
7- Hoda Afshar	documentary photographer, filmmaker and scholar based in Australia	collaborator in several documentary photos and a film project	2017
8- Donna Miles-Mojib	freelance journalist and columnist based in New Zealand	trusted individual in New Zealand, friend, and informal advisor	2019
9- Mardin Arvin	former Manus's detainee, writer, and refugee and asylum seeker activist based in Canada	friend	2013

10- Aref Heidari	former Manus detainee based in the US	friend	2013
11- Shaminda Kanapathi	former Manus detainee, writer, and refugee and asylum seeker activist based in Finland	friend	2014

Table 1 The Project's Participants and their affiliation with Behrouz Boochani

The timing of this project's fieldwork coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which, along with travel restrictions to the countries where my participants resided (Australia, Iran, the Netherlands, and the US), necessitated that most interviews be conducted via online platforms such as Zoom and Skype. The only in-person interview was with Behrouz Boochani, who moved to New Zealand in November 2019. Coincidentally, I was also living in New Zealand at the time, which aligned with my fieldwork. Compared to other Western nations, New Zealand had fewer internal restrictions, allowing those within the country to maintain a relatively normal social life throughout most of the pandemic. This enabled Boochani and me to hold regular in-person meetings to discuss different sections of the dissertation and work on the film.

The questions I asked participants (excluding Boochani) in our semi-structured interviews were primarily centered around the history of their familiarity with the context of offshore detention, their history of acquaintance and collaboration with Behrouz Boochani, their opinions regarding the nature of the offshore regime, the role of art and creativity in confronting the offshore regime, the characteristics of activism in this context, and the role of networks in advancing activism in this context.

Interviews with participants (excluding Boochani) ranged from one to three and a half hours in duration. Over the course of more than two and a half years of fieldwork, I engaged in numerous detailed conversations with Boochani, many of which were either not recorded or, if recorded, were not necessarily used in the film. After completing interviews with other participants, I scheduled a final interview with Boochani, which served as the concluding interview for my fieldwork. This interview was conducted after a significant portion of the coding and thematic analysis had been completed. During the three-hour session, I asked Boochani to elaborate on key themes that had emerged from other interviews, clarify aspects of his work, and address any gaps identified in the qualitative data analysis or the film's narrative. This interview was recorded while driving through Christchurch and its surrounding hills, creating a dynamic setting for our conversation.

Another key layer of qualitative data in this project involves documenting Boochani's daily life and significant life events. The data collected for this purpose has an ethnographic dimension, capturing his lived experiences over an extended period. The footage featured in the film was recorded between November 2019 and June 2022, spanning two and a half years. These segments represent only a fraction of the extensive footage documenting Boochani's daily life, reflections, and involvement in various events.

A major challenge in this fieldwork was building trust with key participants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees. Establishing trust in such contexts is complex due to the deep-seated mistrust many have developed because of past trauma, persecution, precarious conditions, and the need for self-protection in unfamiliar environments (Van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). In research involving vulnerable immigrant populations, it is often more about alleviating pre-existing mistrust than about building trust from scratch (Robinson, 2002). This reality

necessitates research approaches that differ from conventional trust-building methods. The following section details the approach I employed to develop trust with the key participant and how this process unfolded.

Building up trust with the key participant

My family and I migrated from Canada to New Zealand in October 2019 due to my wife's new job. Before migrating to New Zealand, I had only spoken once with Behrouz Boochani through an intermediary, Arash Kamali Sarvestani, his co-director in the film, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. I was in a team that assisted with organizing the premiere of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* at Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, and this event laid the groundwork for my connection with Behrouz Boochani through his co-directors of the film. During Arash's trip to Canada which coincided with my last days residing there, he had mentioned the possibility of Behrouz traveling to New Zealand. However, I did not expect this journey to occur so soon. On November 14th, Boochani's arrival in New Zealand was one of the top headlines in Australia and New Zealand.

Boochani had managed to exit Papua New Guinea with a temporary visa, invited by the Word Festival in Christchurch. Two weeks after his entry, Boochani was scheduled to speak at a public event for the first time as a guest. The tickets for this program quickly sold out, and I was not successful in obtaining one. That is when I got Boochani's number from Arash and for the first time, directly messaged him on WhatsApp and then spoke with him on the phone. Boochani arranged a ticket for me. I drove the 300-kilometer distance from my city of residence to Christchurch to attend this program and saw Boochani for the first time up close at a packed and

magnificent event. The image of the crowd, standing and applauding Boochani for a few minutes after the program, is something I also utilized in the film.

At the book signing ceremony for Boochani, held after the panel, I spoke with Boochani for the first time up close and welcomed him personally. He told me that he would have more free time the next day and that we could have a chat. The next day, during the screening of his film at the Christchurch Museum and while the film was being screened, I walked the streets of Christchurch with Boochani. As I told him about my Ph.D. project during this walk, Behrouz welcomed collaboration with me on the project and agreed to connect me with knowledgeable informants in his network to participate as well. On that day, I also met several individuals from Boochani's circle, including Arnold Zable, Janet Galbraith, Mounes Mansoubi, and Dana Mills. Those meetings paved the way for my later interviews with them. After these two events, my interactions with Boochani became more frequent. With his facilitation, I began contacting and conducting interviews with individuals suggested by Boochani in line with my research criteria.

Around the same time, as a member of the Centre for Global Migration at the University of Otago, I suggested inviting Boochani to our city for an academic event in February 2020. With the center's agreement, we formed a team and organized the event. The main theme of the program was the power of literature and arts to heal and transform. In January and February 2020, Boochani was deeply engrossed in his asylum case for New Zealand, while also declining the acceptance of his case by the United States. When preparations were underway to promote our event in Dunedin, Boochani requested that we not advertise the event too prominently, fearing it might hinder the progress of his case. We respectfully accepted this request and only advertised the event on local networks. The panel was successfully held in a completely full hall

on Friday, February 7, 2020. I was also present in this panel as one of the panelists. The clips from this event are also presented in the film.

For the first time on this trip, he came to our house and met my family. A connection that continued while we lived in New Zealand and is still ongoing through phone calls and messages, despite the fact that I have returned to Canada. I nurtured the trust that was established immediately after Boochani's arrival in New Zealand. However, I strategically decided to interview him in June 2021, after I had completed other interviews. This decision allowed me to approach him with a broader vision of what I studied. I began documenting my interactions with Boochani and the daily nuances of his life on film after only more than a year of knowing him. Although our meetings often involved in-depth discussions related to my project, I was mindful not to let the camera or recorder compromise the genuine bond we were forming. I preferred to capture the essence of our conversations through written memos and reflections after our meetings. Importantly, postponing the introduction of the camera until our mutual trust was solidified made Boochani more at ease in front of the camera when the time came.

One of the first times I began filming for the documentary was during Boochani's move from his first house in New Zealand in February 2021. I traveled to Christchurch to help him with moving. We had 12 hours to pack his belongings, clean the house, and hand it over to the homeowner. As Boochani was packing his items, he recounted many memories from Manus and about his life in Christchurch, which I captured on film. Objects, as discussed by Turkle (2011) are both emotional and intellectual companions, grounding memories, nurturing connections, and sparking fresh insights. The objects trigger thoughts and reflections about the past and inspire discussions without feeling pressured to do so. This fostered a more relaxed and potentially more at-ease interview atmosphere. In some instances, I simply placed the camera in a corner and

recorded the unfolding events, of which I was part, as I was sweeping, vacuuming, cleaning, or engaging in conversation with Boochani. Recording conversations during real-life events and in their natural context was a useful strategy to alleviate the camera's presence, allowing Boochani to speak more comfortably in his comfort zone, and making the conversations feel less artificial for the audience.

Thanks to my sustained relationship with Boochani and his understanding of the film's objectives, he began to identify certain events or life activities he considered suitable for inclusion in the documentary. For instance, before his move to Wellington, Boochani reached out to suggest that we document this transition as well. I aided him in packing and joined him on the journey, documenting the process. Portions of this footage were incorporated into the film as well. Throughout my interactions with Boochani, I captured extensive footage of his daily life, incorporating references to many of his interests living in New Zealand. This comprehensive documentation was perhaps facilitated by the deep trust we nurtured during the filmmaking process, enabling Boochani to comfortably discuss even his most intimate matters, including his romantic relationships, in front of the camera.

Data Analysis

I began my analysis by working with the interview transcripts, coding them using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to identify emerging themes. Because NVivo's timestamped quotations corresponded with specific moments in the recordings, I was able to streamline the transition to video analysis. At this stage, I imported selected video clips into Adobe Premiere and integrated the coded quotations as memo notes, allowing for simultaneous access to both

textual and visual data. To facilitate organization and navigation, I applied color-coded markers to categorize themes within Adobe Premiere.

Recognizing that textual summaries often fail to capture essential nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone, I conducted a comprehensive review of the video interviews with these elements in mind. I extracted key segments that added depth to the analysis and incorporated them into the refined documentary footage. By interweaving thematic connections, I gradually constructed the film's overarching narrative.

This video-based qualitative analysis blended analytical and storytelling components, allowing me to systematically examine qualitative data while shaping the film's narrative. Tasks such as reviewing footage, coding video segments, and documenting thematic patterns were crucial to both the research process and the creative production of the documentary. Interestingly, these tasks overlapped during the analytical phase. As Borish et al. (2021) note, integrating qualitative analysis with documentary filmmaking can streamline the research process, enriching both the scholarly and cinematic outputs. To further enhance the film's narrative, I incorporated an actress, whose role added a new layer of storytelling. Her presence served as a symbolic or narrative bridge between different thematic elements, reinforcing key arguments and expanding the interpretive possibilities of the documentary.

Outline of the chapters

This dissertation consists of seven chapters, each contributing to an exploration of Australia's offshore detention regime, the resistance strategies of asylum seekers, and the role of creative subjectivation in reclaiming political agency.

The introduction establishes the focus of research, outlining the structural and operational mechanisms of offshore detention and their impact on asylum seekers. It presents the core research questions and situates the study within critical migration studies, border enforcement scholarship, and artistic resistance literature. This chapter also provides an overview of the methodological approach, emphasizing documentary filmmaking as both a research tool and a political intervention.

The second chapter introduces the concept of *creative subjectivation* as the central analytical framework of the dissertation. It defines *creative subjectivation* as a transformative process through which detained asylum seekers become active political agents by engaging in artistic and creative resistance. The chapter examines three interrelated processes within this framework: *disidentification*, in which detainees reject imposed subjectivities; *demands for democratic principles*, through which they articulate political claims; and *reconfiguration*, whereby creative practices reshape the experience of detention and reimagine asylum beyond exclusionary state narratives. This theoretical discussion lays the foundation for understanding how creative activism functions within offshore detention.

The third chapter shifts to an examination of the structural and operational components of Australia's offshore detention regime, positioning it within global trends of border externalization, securitization, and the expansion of the border-industrial complex. It explores the *macro and meso* levels of this regime, analyzing how settler-colonial legacies and neocolonial relationships shape contemporary border policies. This chapter examines how the outsourcing of detention to private security firms, the use of remote Pacific islands as detention sites, and the framing of migration through a humanitarian-security nexus contribute to the systematic exclusion and invisibilization of asylum seekers. A focus on Australia's *Pacific Solution* and the

Tampa incident highlights how offshore detention has been institutionalized as a model for deterrence and enforcement beyond sovereign borders. Engaging with debates on the ‘death of asylum’ (Mountz, 2020) and the erosion of refugee protections, the chapter argues that contemporary migration governance is structured to immobilize asylum seekers while maintaining legal and political ambiguity regarding their status.

The fourth chapter moves from structural analysis to an exploration of the *micro-level* dynamics of Australia’s offshore detention regime, with a focus on *Manus Prison*. This chapter provides a timeline of key events, tracing the history of offshore detention on Manus while foregrounding acts of individual and collective resistance. It examines how detainees navigated the oppressive conditions imposed upon them, using creative and political strategies to contest their marginalization. The chapter highlights Behrouz Boochani’s creative subjectivation, demonstrating how his literary and artistic resistance not only exposed the violence of Manus Prison but also played a role in shifting public discourse on Australia’s asylum policies. By drawing on interviews with former detainees, activists, and artists, as well as journalistic and government sources, this chapter connects macro-level policies to the lived experiences of those subjected to them. It argues that resistance within Manus Prison was not only a struggle for survival but also an assertion of political subjectivity in a regime designed to erase asylum seekers’ agency.

The fifth chapter consists of the documentary film *Behrouz Boochani and the Liberating Buddha*, which serves as both a research output and a political intervention. This chapter presents the film as a central component of the dissertation, offering a visual representation of the themes explored in previous chapters. The documentary provides an alternative mode of knowledge production, capturing lived experiences in ways that textual methods alone cannot.

The sixth chapter critically examines the documentary as a methodological and political tool, situating it within the framework of *creative subjectivation*. It discusses how the film embodies the three processes of *disidentification*, *democratic demands*, and *reconfiguration*, offering an alternative space for the representation of asylum seekers' agency. The chapter also considers the ethical dimensions of documentary filmmaking in migration research, addressing questions of authorship, representation, and power dynamics. By reflecting on the challenges and possibilities of using film as a research method, the chapter underscores the significance of visual storytelling in reshaping narratives around asylum and detention.

The final chapter concludes the dissertation by summarizing its key findings and contributions. It reflects on how the study advances scholarly debates on migration governance, political subjectivity, and creative resistance. The chapter also discusses the limitations of the research and suggests directions for future inquiry, particularly in relation to the role of visual methodologies in migration studies. Ending with a reflection on the enduring relevance of artistic resistance in challenging exclusionary border regimes, this chapter reinforces the central argument that creativity is not merely a form of expression but a powerful force in the struggle for political agency.

Chapter 2:

Creative subjectivation and marginalizing regimes of migration control

Creative subjectivation and marginalizing regimes of migration control

*The refugees have identified and exposed the face of an emerging 21st-century dictatorship and fascism, a dictatorship and fascism that will one day creep into Australian society and into people's homes like a cancer.
The refugees have been resisting with their very lives.
Against the real politics of the day.
With their very bodies.
With peace as a way of being and as an expression.
With a rejection of violence.
With a kind of political poetics.
With a particular style of poetic resistance.
These features have become one with their existence.
Refugees pushed back.
Risking their lives and bodies.
Just fragile humans risking everything.
Risking everything that is beautiful.
Risking the only things of value left to them.
Risking what nature had bestowed upon them.
They never gave up these things to become mere bodies subject to politics.
In opposition to a system of discipline and the mechanisation of their bodies, the detained did not surrender. In reality, they proved that the human being is not a creature that can be entirely and completely consumed by politics...[T]his mode of resistance and the messages communicated by the imprisoned is nothing more than refugees asserting and putting into practice their values and their standpoints. They took this stance in order to return something valuable to the majority of the Australian public, to return what it has lost, or what it is in the process of losing. We formulated a schema of humanity that is, precisely, in polar opposition to fascist thinking – the kind of thinking that created Manus prison.
Behrouz Boochani, Manifesto, 2017*

Introduction

Detained asylum seekers held in mandatory immigration detention, especially those in offshore facilities, confront a wide range of deprivations concerning their social, legal, and political rights (Peterie, 2022). The absence of oversight from both national and international governing bodies in offshore warehousing and asylum deterrence sites, coupled with the limited media coverage, foster an environment of secrecy that conceals frequent human rights abuses, facilitated by the governments or the private parties involved (Nethery & Holman, 2016). The harsh conditions within these typically remote immigration detention centers have led scholars to categorize these

facilities as a form of prison (Peterie, 2018; Tofighian, 2018). For detained asylum seekers, the prospect of resistance, exposing the offshore regime, and bearing witness to the oppressive regulations of these sites remains significantly limited. They grapple with restricted access to the outside world. Given the scarce allowance of external individuals to the offshore detention sites and the legal mandate for on-site personnel to observe silence, the available accounts to offshore detention sites are notably limited (Grincer, 2022). Consequently, detainees on offshore detention sites remain secluded from public view and are unable to actively participate in pertinent national discussions (Rae, Holman, & Nethery, 2018). Despite these restrictions, asylum seekers have harnessed various capacities and means to bear witness against the governing offshore regime while resisting its oppressive mechanisms, a dynamic that can be conceptualized under migrant politics.

Migrant politics extend far beyond visible protests by migrants and encompass various strategies employed by migrants, including asylum seekers, to navigate borderland ambiguities, manage social uncertainties, and avoid risks and potential violence in ways that are subtle yet significant for those seeking refuge (Dionigi, 2017). This chapter introduces a conceptual framework for delving into the artistic and creative resistance and interventions undertaken by detained asylum seekers. By doing so, it establishes a foundation for comprehending creative interventions as a means of asserting political subjectivity, rights, and agency within the context of mandatory immigration detention.

Creative Subjectivation

This study introduces a concept of *creative subjectivation* as an analytical tool to explore the transformation of detained refugees and asylum seekers—from being subjects of the state's anti-

politics to becoming active political entities—guided by creative means. Boochani illuminates this perspective in the excerpt from his manifesto that introduces the chapter, discussing a unique form of ‘poetic resistance’ or ‘political poetry’ employed by refugees in challenging harsh anti-refugee politics (Boochani, 2023b). Several critical citizenships and forced migration scholars contribute to the understanding of creative subjectivation (Montange, 2017; Negrón-Gonzales, 2014; Schwartz, 2021), and their perspectives will be discussed in this chapter to support the main argument. In the context of offshore detention, where the subjectivity of asylum seekers is frequently suppressed, the concept of ‘creative subjectivation’ emphasizes the pivotal role of art and creativity as catalysts and enablers for emancipation, providing a communicative space through which access to public representation, political agency, and social justice can be achieved and the ideological foundation of the oppressive offshore regime can be challenged (Rovisco, 2014). In this context, ‘liberation’ refers to the process by which detained refugees and asylum seekers transition from being passive subjects of oppressive state policies to becoming active political agents who can challenge and transform their conditions. Inspired by the resistance journey of figures like Behrouz Boochani, this chapter unpacks creative activism as a force to transcend the invisibility of asylum seekers while enduring offshore detention, known as one of the most hard-line policies and practices towards asylum seekers and refugees (Peterie, 2022).

Central to this transformative process of resistance is the creation of an aesthetic that challenges not only the status quo but also the very ideological foundation that facilitates the establishment of offshore detention. The power of the aesthetic lies in its ability to humanize asylum seekers (Nyers, 2006; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004), provide them with visibility and voice (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; McNevin, 2013), foster empathy and solidarity (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2019;

Sontag, 2003), subvert official narratives (Chow, 2013; Mirzoeff, 2011), create counter-narratives (Gilbert, 2023; Mazzara, 2015), empower the oppressed (Sholette, 2022; Khorana, 2022), and serve as a form of symbolic resistance (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014; Bleiker, 2009). Through these mechanisms, art and creativity play a crucial role in undermining and challenging the ideological foundations of offshore detention.

I define 'creative subjectivation' as a transformative process that entails the construction of subjectivity through diverse artistic, literary, and creative interventions. These interventions are meticulously designed to dismantle prevailing frameworks and confront the established structures that perpetuate the marginalization of refugees and asylum seekers. The concept of creative subjectivation, rooted in the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, represents an adaptation and extension of his notions regarding political subjectivation ([Rancière, 2023](#)). In Rancière's view, political subjectivation involves a reconfiguration of power relations, enabling those who were previously marginalized to demand recognition, equality, and the right to participate in shaping their own destinies. This process of subjectivation is closely linked to the concept of “dissensus,” which refers to the disruption of consensus and the emergence of new political possibilities through disagreement and contestation ([Rancière, 2011](#)). Creative subjectivation encompasses the transformative process through which individuals, often marginalized and oppressed, reclaim their agency and political identity by engaging in artistic and creative interventions (Boochani, 2023b; [Trimboli, 2022](#)). Creative subjectivation encompasses innovative interventions that function as a disruption into the distribution of sensible ([Arda, 2019](#); [Trimboli, 2022](#)) and within the broader landscape of border control. Instead of adhering to a normative portrayal of refugees as either ‘victims’ or ‘villains,’ the framework of creative subjectivation introduces modes of subjectification that serve to reinvigorate the concept of

asylum as a potent political entity. This framework underscores the capacity of art to transcend its conventional role, assuming a potent form of activism capable of debordering and desecuritizing the boundaries of citizenship and migration control (Rovisco, 2014). Thus, art emerges as an influential tool capable of not only rupturing the existing order but also elevating asylum to a position of visibility and agency within the discourse on rights (Boochani, 2023b).

Creative subjectivation is proposed by this study to answer and discuss the research questions guiding this dissertation: How and by which means do art and creative interventions contribute to the construction of political subjectivity within the marginalizing spaces of immigration detention? Additionally, what are the key structural and operational components of Australia's offshore detention regime, and how do these underlying layers interact across different levels to shape the environment for resistance and activism among detained asylum seekers?

In/visibility and marginalization

Making migrants invisible and taking them out of the sight of national and international public is one of the main reasons for moving migrants offshore. 'Invisibility' in its very sense is the ultimate aim and result of carceral border regimes. 'Politics,' as Jacques Rancière shows, first and foremost, involves actively intervening in the visible and sayable (2010). Importing Rancière's insights into refugee studies, Bhimji (2016) highlights the importance of refugee activism for the sake of acquiring visibility. To attain agency, claim rights of citizenship, and be subject of power, visibility of marginalized migrants is key (Köhn, 2016; Mazzara, 2015). However, despite the 'hypervisible' presence of refugees and asylum in the political debates on borders and security, "irregular migrants have few available routes to self-representation

available to them and often have no autonomous public voice” (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013, p. 152).

To unpack the invisibility of asylum and to theorize ways to disrupt the social imaginary of asylum and how it is being constructed is important. As Boochani and Tofighian (2019) show, a “fixed, isolated, static formal definition” has colonized with political understanding of what a refugee or an asylum seeker is (p. 287). Khosravi's (2009) work on Sweden's detention system for asylum seekers shows how state's narrative of ‘care’ has justified detention and deportation, masking its true purpose of marginalization. Through exploration of Sweden's detention system, Khosravi (2009) describes a system that is both caring and punitive, offering a sense of safety while ultimately aiming for deportation of refugees. Borrowing from Kosyakova’s concept of ‘hostility’ (Derrida, 2000), Khosravi (2009) criticizes the double standards and coercive policies that create a ‘hostile hospitality’ and a complex situation for asylum seekers. He argued that these policies, while ostensibly designed to offer protection and refuge, simultaneously subject asylum seekers to punitive and restrictive measures. This paradoxical approach transforms what should be a welcoming environment into one that is fraught with hostility and suspicion.

‘Derealization’ is an othering strategy which is used to create social figures that are “neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (Butler, 2004, 33–34). Without having recognition or acceptance in the politics of migration and without rights for having rights, asylum seekers are rendered into ‘ghostly’ subjects. Gordon (2008) suggests ‘ghosts’ conceptualize specific groups of marginalized people, unspoken and unseen figures that cannot be fully known or understood due to their disappearance. The ghostly imagery of asylum is normalizing through cooperation of states and mainstream media in creating a counter-productive narrative of asylum and displacement (Mazzara, 2015). As Boochani and Tofighian

(2019) argue, refugees are mostly represented in two ways, which are both problematic: “[p]art of society sees refugees as a weak victim; you can see that represented among the advocates and human rights defenders” (P. 278). The continual dissemination of dehumanizing visuals depicting desperate migrants can cultivate a sense of fear and insecurity (Falk, 2015). Cabot (2016) criticizes the frequent application of tragedy and suffering in representing refugees. Many advocacy projects reduce refugees to depoliticized and stereotypical figures who survived horror and disaster without considering the risks of this type of representation (Cabot, 2016). On the other hand, “some people see refugees as terrorists, as dangerous people” (Boochani & Tofighian, 2019 p. 278). The imagery of desperate migrants packed on boats might evoke a sense of sympathy, but the constant distribution of these faceless, voiceless, and desperate crowds by media can also generate a sense of fear and threat (Falk, 2015).

Reducing refugees to depoliticized and stereotypical figures and concentrating solely on their sufferings is another way of making refugees invisible and undermining their agency and breadth of their experiences (Cabot, 2016). This representation risks transforming refugees into ghosts whose voices and realities are distorted or ignored (Derrida, 1981). Imagery serves as 'visual quotations' (Sontag, 2003 p.22), encapsulating moments that linger in the memory. The capacity to evoke empathy and sympathy from individuals is intricately linked to the imagery and visual stimuli that elicit emotional responses (Höijer, 2004 p.520). Expanding upon this idea, some argue that the entire social landscape is enacted through visuals (Campbell, 2007). Bleiker, et. Al. (2013) identify a significant absence of images portraying individual asylum seekers with recognizable facial features within two mainstream Australian media outlets. This distorted imagery connects refugees not primarily with a humanitarian concern, but with fears tied to

national sovereignty and security. These dehumanizing visual patterns reinforce a culture of fear, explaining why refugees fail to elicit a compassionate political response.

Visibility, as outlined by Butler (2009), is confined within specific boundaries demarcated as 'frames'. These frames act as the 'representability' of social figures, molded by prevailing norms. The determination of whose lives and deaths are significant, as well as who deserves care and who does not, is shaped by these norms. To 'consume' or portray the suffering of others, one must remain attuned to the dehumanizing norms that shape these frames, which in turn can obscure viewers' perception of what they see" (Butler, 2009). In order to present the authentic voice of refugees and asylum seekers, it is essential to disrupt and rearrange the distribution of sensory, norms, and frames that underpin the understanding of refugees. Political acts of resistance carried out by refugees possess the potential to disrupt the prevailing aesthetic norms within politics and counteract the imposed state of invisibility. The genuine voices of refugees, if amplified, have the potential to breach the barriers erected by border regimes in controlling discursive and political arenas (Bhimji, 2020).

Any discussion of visibility/invisibility in migration studies should also consider the complexities scholars like Rygiel (2011) aptly points out. While invisibility can be a tool of oppression used by migration and border enforcement regimes to control and marginalize asylum seekers and refugees, it can also be strategically employed by migrants themselves as a way of navigating through migration pathways and accessing opportunities. In this sense, being visible or invisibility can be used as a strategy or a tactic to initiate potential change in the everyday lives of migrants. The point here is that "invisibility does not mean that displaced or illegalized people are unnoticeable in everyday life. On the contrary, they can participate in employment, remake homes, form social networks, and engage in migrant politics on varying scales" (Ilcan et.

Al., 2024). While forced invisibility through detention, deportation, deterrence, and exclusion erode migrants' subjectivity, chosen invisibility allows migrants to navigate restrictive border regimes, evade surveillance, and maintain agency in their journeys. This spectrum challenges simplistic notions of visibility as inherently empowering and invisibility as inherently disempowering. It emphasizes the need to understand the diverse ways in which migrants actively negotiate their visibility and invisibility to pursue their goals and protect themselves in hostile environments. Drawing on their experiences of displacement and precarity, migrants make calculated decisions about when and how to become visible, a kind of 'agency-in-waiting' as articulated by Burn (2015). This updated understanding of invisibility calls for further research into the tactics and strategies migrants employ to navigate complex power dynamics and assert their agency, even in situations where they are seemingly invisible or marginalized.

Migration struggles and the framework of political subjectivation

Within the literature of immigration studies, there are at least three branches that focus on addressing struggles of migrants and non-citizens to obtain rights and justice: *autonomy of migration* (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013; De Genova, 2017; Nyers, 2015), *acts of citizenship* (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Isin & Nyers, 2014) and *political subjectivation* (Melbourne, 2017; Schwietz, 2021 & 2022). These streams of scholarship exchange similarities, but each has its own methods and analytical tools. I examine these theoretical strands and their problems and possibilities to highlight why political subjectivation among them can better explain creative resistance of asylum seekers in the context of offshore detention.

Autonomy of migration provides a kind of sensibility that prioritizes migratory movements over regimes of control (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008). Mobilities of

asylum and other migrants is part of a broad network of human mobility that is a fundamental force in the configuration of capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). For autonomists, mobility exists prior to controls, and not the other way around. Escape in this perspective is “a productive practice that is generative of new modes of being in the world” (Nyers, 2015, p. 29). The autonomy of migration highlights the dynamics within the migratory movements that appropriate mobility, escape control measures and undermine states’ migration policies (Scheel, 2019). However, these effects are not always perceptible. The dynamic of mobility can shift regimes of mobility control “without ever intending it” (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008, p. 75). While the autonomy of migration can be useful in examining conflicts related to the rights and actions of migrants, it tends to idealize the process of migration, leading to an overly optimistic view of migration. The autonomy of migration softens violence of migration governance and downplays power relations and intrusive technologies of governance (Scheel, 2013). More importantly for this research, this approach might explain the migration flows on a macro level, but it might not be the best choice to unpack migrants’ resistance and exercises of autonomy at a micro level. The concept of migration autonomy assimilates narratives and real-life encounters of migrants, to ‘homogenized,’ ‘uniform tropes,’ and ‘subjectless’ abstractions (Scheel, 2013, 2019; Sharma, 2009).

The 'act of citizenship' shapes an important body of critical citizenship studies which recognizes that citizenship is not a static condition, but a dynamic and ongoing process of engagement and participation in shaping the world around us. An understanding of citizenship in the act of citizenship has changed from mere juridical and legal status to practices of citizenship. Defined by Isin (2008), the act of citizenship are those acts that “transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by

bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle” (p. 39). Citizenship with this view is not a ‘status’ but a contentious (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl, 2016; Ilcan, 2022) and often unconventional ‘act or practice’ (Rovisco, 2019, p. 4). Through acts of citizenship, subjects “constitute themselves as citizens” or “claimants of rights” by demanding justice (Isin 2008, p. 18). The Act of Citizenship framework offers an alternative conceptualization of citizenship that reframes it as a “contested site of social struggles”, and a platform that “enables political subjectivity” (, p. 1).

Acts of citizenship can also be a productive platform for understanding activism and political acts of noncitizens: “acts of citizenship are acts that make subjects into activist-citizens, positively rupture and rework the order of citizenship, and create new sites of struggle and ways of being political” (Montange, 2017 p.512). However, because citizenship is commonly viewed as a mechanism for exercising sovereignty, exclusion, and governing membership, some argued that it lacks the capability to envision collective possibilities that surpass its confines as dictated by the nation-state framework (Mezzadra, 2015; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). For Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) redefining the concept of citizenship cannot solve its constraints as citizenship essentially contains the limitations of sovereignty. It is true that claiming citizenship and claiming rights are two different matters (Ataç & Steinhilper, 2016; Schwiertz, 2016), but demanding rights through the same legal framework in which marginalization is rooted remains a subject of debate (Ataç, 2018). That is why some scholars suggested notions like ‘acts of desertion’ (Squire, 2015) or ‘acts of demonstration’ (Walters, 2008) or acts of illegal citizenship (Rigo, 2010) to push the definition of ‘acts’ beyond the territory of citizenship. However, as stated by Mezzadra (2015), the expansion of the concept of citizenship, as demonstrated in the literature on acts of citizenship, carries the risk of relieving

citizenship “of the burden of its historical past” (p. 133). But other scholars like Nyers (2015) showed that citizenship has undergone significant transformations throughout history and aligning it with state sovereignty is not just as simple. In fact, citizenship has never been completely controlled by the state and can sometimes even present substantial disruptions to the interconnected concepts of sovereignty, territory, and citizenship itself (Nyers, 2015).

Despite the efforts aimed at reforming citizenship through the 'acts of citizenship' and acknowledging the potential of citizenship to empower political engagement, the continued utilization of citizenship language as a representation of politics that historically favors state citizens and aligns with the concept of 'citizenism' remains problematic (Bloom, 2022). While the language of citizenship remains closely tied to the states, using that same language to describe actions that challenge state politics can be complicated. This is particularly true when trying to discuss the restrictions imposed by influential citizenship systems or to unpack the complex interactions between states and non-citizen individuals like asylum seekers who are defined outside the traditional boxes of citizenship (Bloom, 2022).

In contrast to the acts of citizenship that “entail purposive or affective disruption of the routinised flow of everyday life,” Rancière’s framework of ‘political subjectivation’ offers a more suitable approach for creative, decentralised, spontaneous, and uncoordinated type of resistance and activism that this study highlighted. This framework is advantageous for addressing the agency of non-citizens in politics, as it avoids the biases associated with citizenship terminology. Instead of relying on citizenship as a defining factor, it challenges hierarchical structures, promotes equality, and aims to transform political landscapes (Montange, 2017). Notably, there are commonalities between ‘acts of citizenship’ and ‘political subjectivation.’ For instance, some scholars have combined these approaches to illustrate how

constrained options for engaging in institutional acts of citizenship can lead to the emergence of new political subjectivities through spontaneous everyday resistance (Baća, 2020).

Political subjectivity refers to the process through which individuals who have been excluded or marginalized in politics, or as described by Rancière (Rancière, 1999, 30) those "who have no part", emerge as active political subjects demanding recognition and inclusion. Throughout this process those who are excluded from political representation become aware of their own agency and their ability to challenge the existing distribution of power. This awareness leads to the creation of new political subjects that want to "be counted as a part of society" (Schwartz, 2021 p.6) and demand a new distribution of power. Rancière argues that political subjectivation is not just about individuals becoming aware of their own capacity to act, but also about the creation of new forms of collective action and new ways of understanding political (1999). He sees political subjectivation as a way of challenging existing power structures and creating a more just and equal society. Marginalized people such as asylum seekers reject their marginal position and construct their own "political subjectivity" (Nyers 2010, 129) through the process of political subjectivation. According to Rancière, "becoming a subject" is not the ultimate goal of subjectivation (Rancière, 1999). Instead, the socio-politico-economic process that has given rise to a specific subjectivity matters the most.

Rancière views politics as a struggle between two conflicting forms of sensibility which are politics and police. A clash arises from the interaction between the given, or what he called police, and the desire for equality, which he identified as politics. This dispute centers around what is accepted and established, and what is considered to be sensible. The police in Rancierian terminology represents the hierarchical order of sensible within a society, a scheme that assigns everybody to their specific task, place, and position: "an order of the visible and the sayable that

sees that a particular activity is visible, and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise” (Rancière 1999, 29). The main reason of ‘politics’ for Rancière is to contest the police order by engendering a platform on which “a prior unseen wrong becomes visible” (Schwartz, 2022). Thus, there is no political subject, nor political subjectivation, without a ‘disagreement’ with the police (Rancière, 1999). Political subjectivation indeed occurs in moments of rupture, where established orders are contested, and new forms of political agency emerge.

Political subjectivity is a byproduct of irreconcilable conflicting forces between migration and the efforts to regulate and control it (Scheel, 2013a). Disrupting the anti-asylum discourse, politics, and practices of the state is a way for asylum seekers to assert their agency and influence the way in which the state responds to their presence (Nyers, 2015). No state can completely lock down or exclude asylum seekers from the national spaces (Martin, 2015). Regimes of migration control are, in fact, “produced by power relations, and are subject to contestation, negotiation, and struggle between state and non-state actors, including migrant detainees” (Montagne, 2017 p. 510). While states exert their full authority to monopolize the politics of migration by determining who will receive protection and who will not, migrant politics and refugee activism can create a rupture in the state's policies, initiate fresh forms of political action, and counteract discriminatory anti-migrant rhetoric and practices.

Some researchers have used the theoretical framework of political subjectivation to illustrate the process of refugees and asylum seekers emerging from marginalization. By comparing the process of collective political subjectivation in two communities of refugees in the United States and Germany, Schwartz (2021) show how undocumented migrants can overcome their isolated position emerging from the convergence of often covert networks and

support systems among marginalized groups and formal and public channels to draw public attention. This combination leads to an increase in agency and results in their rise from a position of marginalization. This combination of invisible self-organization and visible interventions leads to an increase in agencies and results in their rise from a position of marginalization. For example, undocumented migrants may organize a protest in collaboration with a human rights organization, which draws media attention and puts pressure on policymakers, while simultaneously supporting each other through underground networks that provide resources and emotional support. McNevin (2010) analyzed the process of subjectivization through reflecting on a community theatre project by asylum seekers in Melbourne, Australia. She claimed that asylum seekers can counter the negative narrative surrounding their status by adopting artistic practices and asserting themselves as makers and creators. This allows them to establish a presence in the public sphere, claim their rights as members of a civic community, and develop political connections with others.

Sharples (2021) unpacks the use of social media among asylum seekers on Manus Prison and showed that social media not only provides refugees with spaces to ‘connect’ but give the asylum seekers the capacity to publicly bear witness to the violence of the migration regime and disrupt the state’s discourse on offshore detention. Analyzing recurring themes in the 547 tweets of detained asylum seekers on Manus, Sharples (2021) uncovers how asylum seekers' use of social media has undermined the securitized narrative of Australia on asylum seeking and offshoring. Due to the limited scope, Sharples (2021) only studied the use of Twitter and compromised other creative methods and mediums used by asylum seekers. Surma (2018), in a letter exchange with Boochani (2018c), discusses alternative perspectives he used for projecting asylum seekers as human beings and political agents. As Surma (2018) highlights in her letter,

Boochani ‘disrupted’ Australia’s detention regime by “changing grounds”, as Boochani’s voice, image, agency, and use of language all work together to “enact [his] subjectivity and humanity” (p. 519). The counter-narrative of Boochani and his politics, empowers asylum as a whole and the image he has created of asylum seekers unsettles the costly strategies the Australian government has implemented to establish and maintain the borders between asylum seekers and the public (Surma 2018, p. 523).

In another research, Montange (2017) examines a case study of a hunger strike by detained migrants in an inland detention centre in Tacoma, Washington through a conceptual lens of ‘political subjectivization’. She shows how the perceived ‘small acts’ of resistance, such as organizing hunger strikes, creating, and disseminating protest art, participating in sit-ins, or refusing to comply with specific detention center regulations, can create ‘rupture in the order of sovereignty and citizenship’ (509). Montange (2017) shows that rupturous effects of an act of resistance by noncitizen migrants can prove their political agency to themselves, their fellow migrants, and those regimes seek to extend their control over migrants’ bodies (Montange, 2017). Montange also highlights the role of social networks that “enable political subjectivization and ruptures in the order of citizenship” (2017 p. 514). Without networks of solidarity and a supportive network of intimacy, any process of political subjectivation cannot be properly achieved (ibid).

Art has gained increasing attention in recent years as a powerful tool for enabling emancipation and political subjectivation in the field of critical citizenship. Several works, such as those by Martiniello (2015), Marciniak & Tyler (2014), Iannelli & Musaró (2017), Montange (2017), De Ascensao Rovisco (2019), Schwirtz (2021), and others, have explored the potential of artistic expression to create new spaces and forms of interaction that challenge established

political orders and disrupt the prevailing status quo. By examining the emergence, articulation, and practice of political subjectivities across various cases among migrant youth in Germany and the United States, Schwartz (2021) demonstrated explored the emergence of political subjectivation by examining migrant youth in Germany and the United States, demonstrating how political subjects arise through different visible and invisible modes, as well as creative expressions, shedding light on revealing the multifaceted nature of political subjectivation. These youths engage in self-organizations that produce autonomous spaces and facilitate empowerment, self-representation, and rights-claiming, enacting democratic principles and challenging societal subjectification. Schwartz extends Rancière's concept by including these relatively invisible politics, highlighting the need for qualitative research to understand them. By destabilizing entrenched systems and offering experiences that defy the currently dominant regime of perception, art provides a fresh field of experience, as articulated by Rancière (2010). However, further research is needed on art's role in political subjectivation, especially in contexts like offshore detention, where it can destabilize entrenched systems and offer new experiences, as noted by Rancière (2010).

Rancierian perspectives in defining politics, aesthetics, and subjectivity as use in this research can empower scholars in the critical citizenship and forced displacement with new tools to understand the resistance of refugees and asylum seekers in the field of critical citizenship and add new insights to it. There is still a need for more research that centers the perspectives of asylum seekers and refugees in the analysis of these fields. Examining how political subjectivations are enacted and experienced in the environment of immigration detention and understanding how the dynamics of power, agency, and resistance manifest in this context could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of complexities and barriers of refugee and

asylum activism. The present study adopts an approach that examines the artistic and creative interventions of detained asylum seekers as a form of refugee activism, resulting in the emergence of novel subjectivities.

Creative subjectivation and its three modes

‘Creative subjectivation’ is a break into the dominant configurations set to marginalize asylum seekers through a process of political subjectivation, those like asylum seekers, who have “no right to be counted as speaking beings, make themselves of some account” (Rancière 1999: 27).

Creative subjectivation, as I define it in this chapter involves three modes or phases: 1)

disidentification: a denial of a marginalized position and refusal to not be counted or miscounted in the bureaucratic orders of an inegalitarian order; 2) *demand for democratic principles*: a quest by marginalized people over equality and other democratic principles which are denied to them; and 3) *Reconfiguration*: reconfiguring a hierarchical identity, place, or task by an egalitarian logic and performing the visibility and rights not granted to claim beforehand. The three modes of *creative subjectivation* I will discuss in this study are selected based on my empirical insights from the function of art and creativity in the context of offshore detention for migrants, but it can provide conceptual nuances to other arenas in which marginalized knowledge and practices make transformative intervention into the state’s policies and actions.

1. Disidentification

A few other people board. And then they call out my number: MEG45. Slowly but surely I must get used to that number. From their perspective, we are nothing more than numbers. I will have to forget about my name. My ears start ringing when they call out my number. I try to use my imagination to attribute some new meaning to this meaningless number. For instance: Mr MEG. But there are a lot of people like me. What can I possibly do with this damned number (Boochani, 2018a p. 96)?

As the above blurb from Buchani's acclaimed book, *No Friend, But the Mountains* (2018a) showed, systematic erasing of names and identities is a common strategy within the offshore regimes of border control to drive refugees into submission and marginality. Marginalized identities are assigned to migrants “to strip human beings of their personal identities and dignity” (Tofighian, 2020). In response, refusal of a marginalized identity and an unequal social position, which I call disidentification in this study, might be a first step and probably the most important one in constructing refugee activism and political subjectivity.

Pêcheux (1975) conceptualized three modes of societal identity formation through which people come into existence. In this framework, the first mode is termed *identification*, where subjects align themselves with discursive and ideological forms of the dominant power. On the contrary, in the second mode, which he introduced as *counteridentification*, subjects resist and reject the images and sites of identification promoted by the dominant ideology, choosing instead to rebel and oppose the established regime and norms. Pêcheux cautions against the counterdetermination that such an operation may generate, as it can unintentionally reinforce the dominance of the prevailing ideology through controlled symmetry. *Disidentification*, the third mode, presents an alternative approach to dealing with dominant ideology. It neither seeks complete assimilation within the system nor strict opposition to it. Instead, disidentification is a strategic response that simultaneously operates within and against the dominant ideology. Rather than succumbing to the pressures of the dominant ideology (through identification and assimilation) or attempting to break free from its pervasive influence (through counteridentification and utopianism), the approach of 'working on and against' strives to

transform the system's logic from within, consistently laboring to bring about change (Muñoz, 1998).

In Rancière's political framework, contrary to Pêcheux, any process of subjectivation involves a detachment from the naturalness of one's assigned place (Rancière, 1999).

Disidentification for Rancière is highly significant and considered equivalent to subjectivation.

Disidentification is a rejection, an escape to not be counted (Rancière, 1995). Nevertheless, the

concept of political subjectivation that this research proposes goes beyond Rancière's idea of disidentification to encompass a multifaceted understanding of political subjectivation. This

broader understanding is necessary to explain migrant struggles not only as a disruption of

inequality but also as a manifestation of equality (Schwartz, 2021). While in Rancière's view,

disidentification is the act of stepping out of one's prescribed place and demanding a new role or

position within the political community, Pêcheux introduced a concept of 'disidentificatory

subject' who strategically and simultaneously engages with, works within, and resists dominant

forms. Each of these approaches can offer different perspectives on how individuals navigate

their subjectivities and relationships with dominant structures.

The significant distinction between an identity such as “*MEG45*” which is inscribed by

the state's regime of border control, and an acquired identity of “activist”, “writer”, “journalist”

by a migrant like Boochani is the space where politics and political subjects come into existence.

The individuals become political when they occupy a space that lies between two different logics

of police and politics. While the subject positions defined by the police orders enforce the status

quo and maintain the existing power structures, the logic of politics is based on transformative

actions. However, there is a constant tension between these two logics, it is in this space of

contestation that individuals can assert their agency and challenge the dominant power structures.

Of course, it must be noted that Rancière's emancipatory politics contradicts an identity politics. As he certainly highlighted that "every identity is an imprisonment in a role" (Rancière and Dupuis-Déry, 1999). More than identities emerging, the transition and the process of subjectivation is what matters the most to Rancière: "the politics of emancipation is the politics of the self as an other, or, in Greek Terms, a heteron. The logic of emancipation is a heterology" (Rancière, 1992: 59). Political subjectivation and political identification are not the same. Political subjectivation involves a process where individuals reject fitting into existing politicized identity categories, and instead, they build themselves anew, even though they have differences (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013). Subjectivation occurs and the subject emerges amid confrontations between identities and positions: "[t]he subject is an outsider or, more, an in-between" (Rancière, 1995: 67).

Politics, according to Chambers (2013), is a disruptive force that challenges established orders with the demand for equality. This disruption, particularly by marginalized groups, can be understood as a process of disidentification. Disidentification, as Rancière (1999) articulates, involves actively challenging dominant aesthetic norms and perceptions of what is sensible. It is a starting point for marginalized individuals to resist imposed identities and forge new subjectivities. However, as Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' suggests, deeply ingrained norms and behaviors present a significant obstacle. These norms shape how people perceive the world and act within it, making it difficult to break free from assigned identities. This challenge is reflected in critiques of Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is constructed through repetitive actions and behaviors.

Despite the weight of ingrained norms and societal structures that often limit individual agency, artistic and cultural practices offer a unique avenue for challenging these constraints. They provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, for alternative narratives to emerge, and for new forms of identity and belonging to be imagined. In the context of migration, where individuals are often dehumanized, stereotyped, and silenced by anti-migration rhetoric and policies, the role of art becomes even more crucial. As Chambers (2013) argues, the power of art lies in its ability to disrupt the status quo, to create politically active subjects who challenge existing power structures and demand a more equitable and democratic future.

Rancière (1999, 2010) highlights that political visibility is often limited to certain actors, leaving many individuals and groups marginalized and unrecognized. Disidentification emerges when activists from these marginalized positions challenge this status quo, making their dissent visible and audible. This act of dissent disrupts the established order, opening up a space for political contestation. As Rancière (1995) argues, such disagreement between the state and marginalized groups can fundamentally reshape participation dynamics. By asserting their agency in the public sphere, those previously rendered invisible can engage with authorities on equal terms, thereby transforming the political landscape.

Wieviorka (2006) argues that we live in an "era of the witness," where personal testimonies are gaining prominence over traditional, "objective" historical narratives. This shift underscores the crucial role of individuals with lived experiences of rights violations in shaping our understanding of such abuses. Their testimonies challenge official accounts and offer valuable insights into the human impact of these violations. This importance is amplified in contexts like immigration detention facilities, where access by mainstream media is often restricted. In such cases, personal testimonies become a primary means of exposing the punitive

practices and cultures of secrecy that perpetuate within these institutions (Rae, Holman & Nethery, 2018). Testimonies can work as a powerful form of resistance against systems designed to silence and render marginalized communities invisible, while also attracting responsible observers attuned to injustice (Peters, 2001; Rae, Russell & Nethery, 2019). These witnessing accounts serve dual functions: they are both a record of events and a form of disidentification that challenges the authority and completeness of institutionalized or 'official' histories and narratives (de Souza & Russell, 2023; Rae, Holman & Nethery, 2018). Disidentification through witnessing not only empowers refugees as political subjects but also serves as an intermediate stage between disidentification and the realization of political agency, allowing individuals to assert their narratives against oppressive regimes and unproductive narratives that seek to breach their rights.

Disidentification, the process through which marginalized individuals assert their agency and challenge established power structures, extends beyond formal engagement with authorities (Rygiel, 2011). It emerges through diverse and creative pathways, encompassing both direct interactions with authorities and the construction of alternative spaces for subjectivity outside bureaucratic and traditional political structures. These actions, far from being merely logical debates or negotiating compromises, constitute a struggle for recognition and equal participation (Žižek, 1999, p. 188). From a Rancièrian perspective, (non)citizenship activism, encompassing these varied forms of disidentification, foster new political subjectivities by challenging the assumption that current distribution of civic and political engagement is the sole available pathway to equality. This, in essence, captures the core of disidentification.

2. Demand for democratic principles

I think the only thing that helped us persevere for the long stretch of time was our dedication to principles of humanity and human values. In the community meetings we held every day at 5pm, we stayed true to the principles of love, friendship, and brotherhood. There was nothing greater for us than respect. There was nothing greater for us than equality and camaraderie. We have reminded a majority of the Australian public that throughout their history they have only ever imagined that their democracy and freedom has been created on the basis of principles of humanity. In reality, it was a resistance that was completely democratic... (Boochani, 2017 Dec 9th).

The second mode of creative subjectivation I suggest is *demand for democratic principles* which features democratic principles as the content of conflict between the police orders and the logic of equality (Rancière 1992, 1999). This demand features democratic principles as the central point of contention between the existing ‘police order’ (the established power structures and norms) and the marginalized individuals' demands for equality. It is an ongoing struggle between these two forces over issues such as equal rights and radical democracy. As Chambers (2013) argues, democratic principles provide the foundation for marginalized individuals to demand their rights and empowerment. Through political subjectivation, individuals who become politically active can extend democratic principles to new subject positions and spaces (Schwiertz 2021). This process not only challenges existing power structures but also fosters the spread of democratic ideals, thereby creating new avenues for participation and recognition.

According to Rancière (1999), democracy involves a reversal of the traditional social order, enabling those typically excluded from power to participate in the political process. However, democracy is not just a political system but a social and cultural one as well, enabling new forms of equality and recognition to emerge. It is a radical reconfiguration of power relations, allowing for the emergence of new political subjects previously excluded from the political sphere (Kalyvas, 2019). Within this system, there is a common set of principles for bringing people together while also containing premises for disrupting the consensus (Craig,

2015). Democracy disrupts the current power structure, challenging the very foundations of the social and political system (Czajka & O'Brien, 2022, p. 6). It involves a fundamental reconfiguration of power relations and social norms, not just minor changes, or compromises within the existing power structure.

Rancière used the term 'dissensus' (2010) to refer to the way in which democracy creates disagreement and conflict within society. In a democratic system, people with different interests, values, and perspectives are allowed to express themselves and engage in political debate and decision-making. This can lead to disagreement and conflict, but Rancière sees this positively, as it allows for the emergence of new political subjects and the creation of new forms of political and social life. Democracy for radical thinkers is an ongoing process; an 'active capacity to claim rights' (Balibar 2008, 530), a "never-ending and always-contested process", and an "infinite challenge" (Schwartz, 2022 p. 290). This understanding of democracy, therefore, is not compatible with the consensus democracies and neoliberal institutions representing democracies. Rancière views democracy as a process of implementing egalitarian political resistance within conditions of inequality, as opposed to the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a system of governance (Rancière, 1999, 2010). By calling democracy "intrinsically radical," Rancière suggests that democracy is not just a matter of making incremental changes or improving the existing system, but rather it involves a radical transformation of society and culture. This means that democracy is not just a political system, but a way of thinking and living that challenges the status quo and creates new possibilities for social and political change.

In contrast to dissensus which is the core of Rancierian politics (Rancière, 1999), consensus democracies are built on suppressing the challenges, and whatever identified as dissent and rupture. For Rancière, consensus democracies are not necessarily representative of

democratic values. They are instead new types of police order (1999, disagreement p. 85) with similar arrangements of domination. The Rancièrian politics advocates for a radical rethinking towards the relationship between politics, power, and inequality that is necessary to challenge the assumptions that underlie these systems of power and domination, and to create new forms of political organization that are based on the principles of equality and democracy (Rancière, 1999).

Sovereign power is highly relied on the ability to determine who is included and who is excluded, while migratory movements inherently challenge this control through their constant and fluid nature. That led to an intrinsic dispute between flows of migration and the regimes of border control (police). As the flows of migration “cannot be stopped or controlled completely” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 43), the states or the territories with the highest demand for migration (e.g., European Union, US, UK, Australia) adapt rigid and sometimes oppressive forms of governance to deprive undesired migrants from participating in their political community and marginalize them. These measures regulate the distribution of the sensible and affect our conception of who can participate in the political community, “who is seen, heard or perceived, whose speech is discerned or discernable” (Czajka & O’Brien, 2022). The portions of sensible, “spaces, times, forms of activity” (Craig, 2015) available to ‘undesired migrants’ are usually very limited or unequally distributed. In the Rancierian intellectual apparatus, politics is born out of these unequal distributions and the disputes over equality. By drawing on Rancière, I avoid the common victimization approaches to study migration struggles against oppressive regimes of border control and migration. Instead, I conceptualize non-citizen migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, stateless people, economic migrants, forced migrants, etc) as a demo of democracy or participants in demonstration of democracy (Rancière, 1992, 1999, 2004). Even the most

marginalized categories of migrants such as asylum seekers and refugees are potential political subjects that unlike their denial of rights can initiate creative ways of subjectivation and intervene in the dominant orders of sensible based on the democratic principles.

Boochani, in the selected blurb from his manifesto (Boochani, 2017 December 9), presented as the introduction of the chapter, referred to these values as 'principles of humanity and human values.' In the same piece of writing (n.p), Boochani stated, "[t]here was nothing greater for us than equality and camaraderie," which aligns with Rancière's main political drive: the demand for equality. One of Rancière's fundamental principles is that "one should presuppose that all human beings possess equal intellectual capacities and should be treated accordingly" (Pauwels, 2020 p. 18). Similarly, Schwartz (2021) recommended a theory of 'radical democracy as practice,' which extends the understanding of democracy beyond democratic regimes to practices aligned with ideal democratic principles. This understanding of democracy is aiming to foster democratic engagement by creating spaces for all people to practice democracy rather than just imposing policies. By challenging power structures and enabling social change, a democratic system combats inequality and sustains change by providing opportunities for democratic enactment, ensuring ongoing individual and community agency. Simultaneously, it sustains change by providing opportunities for democratic enactment, ensuring ongoing individual and community agency.

3. Reconfiguration

The refugees have been able to refashion 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 the real face of refugees for a democratic Australia to discern (Boochani, 2017 Dec 9th n.p).

The third mode of creative subjectivation and a key part of it is reconfiguring the inegalitarian orders with principles of equality. This mode of creative subjectivation underscores the importance of initiatives that challenge the prevailing orders of exclusion/marginalization and forge fresh realities based on inclusion and equality. In refugee activism, the act of reconfiguration sometimes refers to highly visible actions such as marches, group strikes, or any public protests that have the capacity to challenge the state's norms regarding the illegalization, dehumanization, and exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from the public sphere (Escudero and Pallares, 2020; Monforte, 2020; Swerts, 2020). These actions create visible public spectacles that inspire others to take action. But in addition to these grand acts, reconfiguration in the literature also refers to the transformative potential of seemingly ordinary acts, such as daily acts of care, simple enactment of citizenship or even small gestures of solidarity within marginalized spaces of migrants (Fleischmann, 2020; Mocca and Osborne, 2019; Palmberger, 2022). These everyday acts of care and cohabitation can be disruptive because they challenge the prevailing order of authority by juxtaposing a solidarity-based community with one rooted in exclusion.

In Jacques Rancière's theory of political subjectivation, reconfiguration refers to the process of transforming existing social relations and power structures through the creation of new forms of collective action and subjectivity. According to Rancière (1999), reconfiguration involves breaking down the existing hierarchies and categories that structure our social and political order and creating new ways of understanding and organizing ourselves. This can involve a variety of different tactics, from the creation of new forms of political organization to the use of art as a means of challenging dominant norms and expectations. These phases of creative subjectivation consist of the efforts to change the police orders, permeate into the sensible, and intervene in what could be seen, heard, or said with an egalitarian logic (Rancière,

1999). The demand and participation of those who 'have no-part' in politics is not just about finding a subject position within the orders of status quo. This participation makes visible the divides exist in the perceptible while also demonstrating possibilities for rearranging the sensible orders (Schaap, 2021).

Politics for Rancière is necessarily emancipatory because political action for him is about radically "contesting" and "reconfiguring" the orders based on the logic of equality (1999: 30). For example, Rancière (2010) argued that political subjectivation can be achieved through the creation of what he calls "moments of dissensus" - moments where existing power relations are disrupted, and new forms of collective action and subjectivity can emerge. These moments might involve the use of protest, civil disobedience, sharing an article, performing a play on stage or other forms of direct action to challenge the status quo and create new possibilities for political engagement. These moments are not necessarily coordinated and can be spontaneous (Baća, 2020). They are 'microsubversions'; small, subtle acts or strategies aimed at challenging established norms, systems, or power structures. While they might seem insignificant on their own, collectively they can contribute to questioning or undermining larger societal or institutional constructs (Smith, 1996). As demonstrated by Scott (1990), these subtle, creative, and unorganized individual acts of resistance serve to enhance collective and networked efforts. They achieve this by reinforcing shared beliefs and creating fresh opportunities for collective interactions, which, in turn, contributes to the development of political subjectivity.

By breaking down existing hierarchies and creating new ways of understanding and organizing ourselves, we can create the conditions for a more democratic and egalitarian society. Noncitizen struggles over rights play an essential part in expanding the field of experience and inventing new forms of political subjectivity beyond citizenship (Balibar 2004). Breaking away

from the marginalizing spaces and positions assigned to migrants and performing visibility is, therefore, a very essential step towards reconfiguring the orders of sovereignty in invisibilizing spaces of offshore detention. Gaining recognition from other marginalized, exploited, or disregarded groups and becoming their symbolic representative, even when not directly engaged in resistance or the process of subjectivation, is another aspect and outcome of political subjectivation, as stated by Baca (2020).

Challenging and dismantling existing hierarchies open up possibilities for radical reimagination of societal structures and create conditions for a more democratic and egalitarian society. As Balibar (2004) explains, noncitizen struggles for rights are not merely about gaining legal status; they play a pivotal role in expanding the boundaries of political participation and inventing new forms of subjectivity that transcend the limitations of traditional citizenship. This resonates with Fraser's (2005) concept of "abnormal justice," which emphasizes the need to address the unique claims and struggles of those excluded from the dominant political order, particularly in contested contexts like offshore detention regimes where the very foundations of justice are under dispute. In such regimes, where the state actively seeks to render migrants invisible, resisting the invisibility itself becomes a powerful form of political action. Gaining visibility in this context is a form of reconfiguring the 'order of the sensible' (Rancière, 1999) and asserting agency to demand recognition.

Furthermore, the visibility and agency gained through these struggles can extend beyond an individual empowerment to become collective. As Baca (2020) suggests, marginalized individuals who become symbols of resistance can inspire and mobilize other oppressed groups, even if they are not directly involved in activism. By recognizing the interconnectedness of their struggles and engaging in collective action, marginalized groups can create a powerful force for

social transformation, dismantling oppressive structures and building a more just and equitable society.

The aesthetic regime of art, by challenging established norms and hierarchies, creates the conditions for reconfiguration of reality and political change. It can open up new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting the world, empowering individuals, and groups to challenge existing power structures. Aesthetics, therefore, has political impact by creating a space for dissensus—disagreement that disrupts consensus—and enabling new forms of collective action and subjectivity. In Rancière's philosophy, aesthetics, and politics, while deeply intertwined, are distinct modes of experience and intervention in the world. Aesthetics, for Rancière, is not merely about art or beauty; it refers to the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004), encompassing sensory perceptions, conceptual categories, social norms, and political hierarchies. Politics, on the other hand, is a process of disrupting the existing order, challenging hierarchies, and creating new forms of equality and participation.

Art, as a mobile form of activism, has the power to transcend borders, boundaries, and confinements. Artistic interventions are effective forms and tools of activism to contest and reconfigure anti-asylum politics and violence of border regimes (Arda, 2019; Conlon & Gill, 2015; Kohn, 2016; Marciniak & Tyler, 2014; Surma, 2018; Tomsy, 2020). Focusing on contemporary artworks depicting the continuous migration of Middle Eastern refugees to Western countries in Europe and Canada, Arda (2019) employed Rancière's conceptual framework of 'ethical art' versus 'aesthetic art' (Rancière, 2004) to explore how present-day art portrays the diverse experiences of refugees.

Understanding how art and creativity contribute to political subjectivity can be further illuminated by examining the Rancièrian concepts of 'ethical art' and 'aesthetic art.' Ethical art,

according to Rancière (2009), aims to convey moral or political messages and uphold certain values, often advocating for social justice and equality. In contrast, aesthetic art introduces new ways of perceiving the world (sensorium), fostering dissent and diverse viewpoints (Rancière, 1999). Rancière challenges traditional notions of art by asserting that it does not necessarily have a predetermined purpose or function. Instead, the essence of aesthetic art lies in its capacity to disrupt established orders of perception and challenge the conventional distribution of the sensible. He values the dissensual potential of aesthetic art over the potentially didactic nature of ethical art (Rancière, 2004), suggesting that the latter can inadvertently become a form of control. Aesthetic art, on the other hand, brings about political impact not through direct representation but by altering how people perceive the world, thus questioning fixed universal values and highlighting a bottom-up emergence of universality.

Rancière's emphasis on the aesthetic regime of art as a tool for disrupting established norms and fostering dissent finds resonance in the context of refugee representation. Arda (2019) delineates two primary functions of ethical art concerning refugees: 'human condition assessment' and 'agency empowerment.' The former seeks to raise awareness of the plight of refugees, often by highlighting their suffering and vulnerability. The latter aims to amplify refugees' voices and agency, displaying their resilience and capacity for self-determination. While both approaches have merit in advocating for social justice and raising awareness of refugee issues, Arda (2019) argues that they fall short of truly disrupting the dominant narratives surrounding refugees. The portrayal of refugees as either passive victims or heroic survivors, while well-intentioned, can inadvertently reinforce existing stereotypes and limit our understanding of their complex experiences.

In contrast, Rancière advocates for an 'aesthetic art' that goes beyond raising awareness or empowering agency. This form of art, rooted in dissensus, seeks to challenge, and unsettle the established frameworks through which we perceive refugees (Rancière, 2014). By blurring the lines between categories like victim and rescuer, refugee and humanitarian, or refugee and citizen, aesthetic art creates space for new understandings and perspectives to emerge. The concept of creative subjectivation aligns with this notion of aesthetic art. By offering alternative conceptions of refugees that challenge dominant narratives, art dismantles the existing order of the sensible and opens new possibilities for political engagement and social change (Rancière, 2010). This transformative potential is evident in the works of artists and writers like Behrouz Boochani, whose creative expressions challenge us to rethink our assumptions about refugees and recognize their full humanity.

Artistic interventions are more than just mere representations; they function as alternative forms of knowledge (Alpers, 1983; Butler, 1990; de Sousa Santos, 2015; Köhn, 2016; Rancière, 2004). Svetlana Alpers (1983) argued that artistic interventions transcend the boundaries of traditional knowledge dissemination by engaging with sensory experiences and emotions that words alone cannot capture. Alpers emphasized that art's ability to evoke complex emotions, challenge preconceived notions, and incite personal reflections contributes to its role as an alternative form of knowledge. This aligns with the notion that art communicates on a different plane, often bypassing linguistic constraints to provide a more immediate and intuitive understanding of the world. Furthermore, Judith Butler (1990) brought a critical dimension to the discussion by exploring the performative nature of art. Butler's theories on performativity and identity formation extended to theorize art's capacity to challenge normative structures and create new ways of seeing and being. Artistic interventions, as Butler suggested, disrupt dominant

narratives, and open up spaces for marginalized perspectives, thus functioning as vehicles for transforming societal understanding. According to Köhn (2016), political actions in a socially engaged form of art “take on aesthetics characteristics, in which politics is not only artistically represented but activated and performed” (Köhn, 2016, p. 16). Politics in this form of art is actively brought to life, performed, and rearranged the sensory configurations. This implies that the artist does not just depict political ideas but enacts or demonstrates them within the context of art and creativity. By reconfiguring sensibilities and providing visibility to bodies without political representations, art and creativity offers numerous possibilities to rupture hierarchical representations established by the border politics. Art is an autonomous realm of knowledge creation, carrying the power to both make and dismantle. These capacities along with art’s ability to elicit sensations, positions art as a transformative force that can forge order from chaos or disrupt established norms (O’Sullivan, 2001). Deleuze’s perspective echoes this sentiment, regarding art as a force of deterritorialization that challenges entrenched frameworks and unveils novel avenues for explorational line of flight that escapes fixed molds and fosters novel connections and intensities (2004). Deleuze characterizes artists as ‘nomads’, journeying along these lines of flight to birth fresh domains of thought and expression. The primary concern of according to O’Sullivan (2001), is not “making sense of the world” but “exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, [...] in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced” (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 130). (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 130).

Moreover, art is not merely concerned with representations; it deeply engages with affect, encompassing the emotional and sensory dimensions that influence individuals’ interactions with borders, refugee politics, and citizenship issues (Fortier, 2016; Ticktin, 2016; Walters & Luthi, 2016). This focus on affect underscores how emotions, feelings, and sensory experiences shape

people's perspectives, attitudes, and actions within the realm of citizenship and political engagement. Fortier's (2016) concept of 'affective citizenship' highlights how emotional experiences, rather than simply rational calculations, often drive individuals' involvement in civic and political activities. Ticktin's (2016) exploration of the emotional landscape of migration underscores how affect—the emotional responses of both migrants and host communities—profoundly influences perceptions, attitudes, and policies related to migration and displacement. These analyses of affect reveal that emotions are not separate from rational decision-making but are, in fact, intertwined with how individuals perceive and enact their roles as active (non)citizens. In this way, art, through its ability to evoke powerful emotions and challenge conventional understandings, can be a potent tool for political subjectivation, fostering empathy, solidarity, and a sense of shared humanity across borders.

Uniting people against brutality of border regimes and making them engaged in taking actions and solidarity, might be barely possible through a simple delivery of news and information. Instead, art in its various forms, holds the capacity to emotionally resonate with individuals, serve as conveyors of truths, and has the power to bypass the difficulties of language and communicate its message in a more straightforward and impactful manner. Art as an emancipatory platform opens up countless possibilities for the unification of artists and spectators to contest status quo (Kilcoyne, 2018). Artistic and literary interventions can make ruptures into the functionality and distribution of the orders within the suppressive regimes of migration control, wherein new sensorial passages may arise. Passages that “*refashion*” the image and condition of refugees within the ruling orders as Boochani (2017) admitted in the introductory blurb of this chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how art and creative interventions are mobilized in refugee activism as *a creative force of subjectivation*. Displaced people and asylum seekers are invisibilized and disappeared within and across different macro, meso, and micro scales. Lack of recognition for asylum has become a global trend in the governance of displacement. We are witnessing disappearance and erosion of asylum within different scales. In an environment where “extreme measures” (Rappaport, 2021 March 29) and “hardline plans” (Laughland, 2013 August 16) are in place to deter asylum seekers and get them disappeared, I see *disidentification*, *enactment of equality*, and *reconfiguration* as three modes of political subjectivation that can play a critical role against the anti-asylum discourse and practices of the states in the Global North. To rupture into marginalizing policies and counter depoliticization of asylum, acquiring political subjectivity of marginalized migrants must be the main purpose of refugee activism. Art, literature, and other creative interventions are promoted in this study as forces with the highest capacities to reject a marginalized subject position, transgress the blocked borders, and reconfigure the field of experience within the offshore detention regimes. Discussion of these dimensions contribute to our understanding of the governance and operation of power within Australia’s regime of offshore detention and highlights the role of artistic, literary, and creative interventions. Drawing on Rancierian politics, this chapter provides a theoretical foundation to understand artistic interventions as important mediators of subjectivation in marginalizing spaces of asylum.

Chapter 3:

Australia's offshore detention regime: the architecture of a violent regime and its integrated layers

Australian offshore detention: the architecture of a violent regime and its integrated layers

Introduction

This chapter and the next (Chapter 4) unpack the multi-layered apparatus of exclusion that defines Australia's offshore detention regime, with a particular focus on the entanglement of humanitarianism and securitization as key mechanisms of state power. While officially framed as a humanitarian initiative aimed at protecting lives and maintaining orderly migration, offshore detention functions as a punitive regime, systematically subjecting asylum seekers to indefinite detention, legal limbo, and enforced invisibility. The chapter argues that Australia's offshore detention regime enforces punitive measures under the justification of humanitarian protection while simultaneously maintaining the security logic of border enforcement. The humanitarian-security nexus enables the state to rationalize its policies as both compassionate and necessary for national security, masking the structural violence inherent in the system.

In addition, this chapter examines the historical continuities between settler-colonial governance and contemporary border practices, illustrating how the Australian state extends colonial logics of elimination and exclusion into its migration policies. By analyzing these dynamics at both macro and meso levels, the chapter demonstrates how Australia's border enforcement operates as both part of a global system of migration control and a national project rooted in settler-colonial anxieties and racialized exclusion. At the macro level, Australia's offshore detention system aligns with broader Global North strategies of border externalization, preventing asylum seekers from reaching sovereign territory while fostering a profitable border industrial complex. At the meso level, the system reflects Australia's historical and ongoing colonial relations with the Pacific region, particularly through policies such as the 2001 Tampa incident, which cemented offshore detention as a global model of migration deterrence.

To guide this analysis, the chapter explores the key question: What are the structural and operational components of Australia's offshore detention regime, and how do these layers interact across macro and meso levels to shape resistance and activism among detained asylum seekers? In answering this, the chapter reveals how offshore border regimes render vulnerable groups increasingly invisible and marginalized, contributing to what critical migration scholars have termed the “death of asylum” (Mountz, 2020) or the “end of asylum” (Grewcock, 2017; Schoenholtz et al., 2021). By contextualizing these systemic mechanisms, this chapter establishes the foundation for Chapter 4, which shifts the focus from structural critiques to the lived experiences of detainees and their acts of resistance.

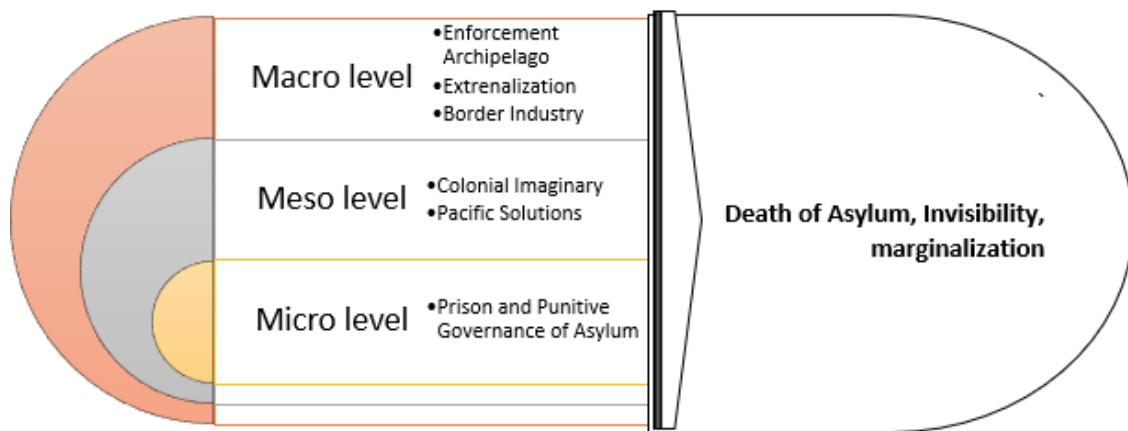


Figure 1- integrated layers of the architecture of enforcement border regime

Invisibility and the death of asylum

The notion of asylum, rooted in the principle of offering sanctuary to individuals fleeing persecution, has faced increasing erosion in both law and practice. Rather than being an unfortunate consequence of stricter immigration policies, the deliberate dismantling of asylum pathways, the proliferation of legal and logistical barriers, and the criminalization of irregular

border-crossing form part of a calculated system designed to maintain global inequalities (Khosravi, 2018). Asylum systems in the Global North have become increasingly exclusionary, prioritizing border security over humanitarian obligations and leaving many refugees stranded in legal and geographic limbo (Mountz, 2020; Elsrud & Lalander, 2022; Moutselos, 2023). Schoenholtz, Schrag, and Ramji-Nogales (2021) describe this erosion as the “end of asylum”, particularly in the United States, where the ‘legal wall’ built during the Trump era dismantled key protections enshrined in the Refugee Act of 1980. This shift is not unique to the U.S.; rather, it represents a broader global trend in which economically developed states progressively restrict access to asylum while publicly maintaining a rhetoric of humanitarian concern.

Building on Judith Butler’s insights into precarity and the politics of recognition (Butler, 2004), Mountz (2020) conceptualizes the death of asylum through three interconnected forms of death: physical, ontological, and political. Physical death refers to the thousands of migrant fatalities occurring along perilous migration routes. Between 1990 and 2015, at least 19,173 migrants perished in maritime disasters, with many more deaths undocumented (Williams & Mountz, 2018). Since 2014, over 50,000 asylum seekers have died attempting to cross borders, more than 60 percent of whom remain unidentified (Black & Sigman, 2022). Most of these deaths have occurred near territories of Global North states, including Australia, the European Union, and the United States, where restrictive policies have forced asylum seekers into increasingly dangerous migratory routes.

Paradoxically, rather than reducing migrant deaths, the expansion of offshore enforcement and deterrence measures has exacerbated the risks faced by asylum seekers (Banerjee, Misrahi-Barak & Lacroix, 2024; Mountz, 2020; Squire, 2017; Weber, 2022). As access to asylum is systematically dismantled, migrants are left with diminishing legal and

geographic options, effectively forcing them into situations where survival itself is uncertain.

This legal impossibility of seeking protection, Mountz argues, constitutes the ontological death of asylum. A state in which the very category of the asylum seeker is being erased through policy.

Furthermore, asylum's political death occurs when anti-asylum measures gain widespread public legitimacy, reinforcing the normalization of exclusionary policies. Governments actively cultivate public consent for deterrence regimes, framing asylum seekers as threats rather than rights-bearing subjects (De León, 2018; Mountz, 2020; Weber, 2022). Through this process, asylum ceases to exist not only as a legal category but also as a politically recognized right.

While Mountz does not explicitly categorize social death, her work aligns with broader scholarship that examines how asylum seekers experience exclusion, isolation, and the erosion of social personhood in detention (Patterson, 1982; Cacho, 2012). The islands used technologies of power, isolating refugees from broader society and stripping them of the ability to engage in meaningful social and political life (Mountz, 2011; Conlon & Hiemstra, 2017). Resistance to this isolation lies in re-creating the 'social', despite systemic attempts to separate asylum seekers from both each other and the outside world (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). Within the confines of offshore detention, creativity becomes a tool for reclaiming subjectivity and resisting social erasure (Gill et al., 2018). Acts of solidarity, community-building, and mutual support among detained individuals and their extended networks function as counterforces against the isolating intentions of the detention regime (Turner, 2016; Bosworth, 2014). These forms of social resistance highlight the resilience and agency of migrants in constructing social bonds, even in environments explicitly designed to erase them (Bailey et al., 2020; Sharples, 2021).

Humanitarian Borders and Hostile Hospitality

Humanitarian borders function through a logic of containment and triage, sorting migrants into hierarchies of deservingness. Refugees who fit the mold of the ‘ideal victim,’ those who appear passive, compliant, and deserving—are more likely to receive protection, while others, including politically active refugees, ethnic minorities, and young men, are often criminalized or excluded under the mandates of securitized borders (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). States and international agencies frame rescue missions, aid distribution, and offshore processing centers as acts of care, yet these humanitarian interventions often serve to legitimize coercion, surveillance, and exclusion (Weber & Pickering, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). In Australia, for instance, policies justified as ‘protecting’ asylum seekers from dangerous journeys ultimately work to externalize borders and confine refugees in offshore prisons.

This paradox is what Khosravi (2011) calls hostile hospitality. A state-controlled system where the offer of protection is conditional on obedience and containment. As Derrida (2000) argues, hospitality is always structured by power: the host welcomes but also decides who may stay and under what conditions. Australia’s offshore detention regime exemplifies this tension. While presenting itself as a humanitarian state, it systematically confines, surveils, and dehumanizes asylum seekers under the justification of national security.

The Humanitarian-Security Nexus in Australia’s Offshore Detention Regime

Australia’s offshore detention regime is a clear example of the entanglement of humanitarianism and securitization, where rhetoric of care is strategically deployed to justify restrictive and punitive border policies. This dynamic, conceptualized as the humanitarian-security complex (Walters, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015), reflects the dual imperatives of protecting human rights

while enforcing national security. Walters (2011) emphasizes that contemporary borders are not fixed but mobile and diffuse, operating through transnational enforcement regimes where humanitarianism functions as a technology of governance. The spatial and moral ambiguity of humanitarian borders allows states to obscure restrictive policies behind a veneer of compassion.

By framing punitive measures as humanitarian interventions (such as preventing ‘dangerous sea crossings’ and ‘saving lives’) Australia constructs an image of itself as a benevolent actor, even as it externalizes its border controls and subject asylum seekers to indefinite detention. This narrative extends beyond offshore detention to onshore punitive measures, where similar rhetoric is used to justify restrictive visa conditions, community detention, and limited access to essential services for asylum seekers. Although presented as alternatives to detention, these measures ultimately function as tools of control and exclusion, reinforcing the humanitarian-security complex across both offshore and onshore domains (Weber & Pickering, 2011).

The following parts of this chapter examine how Australia’s offshore detention regime operates at both macro and meso levels. At the macro level, the analysis explores border externalization and global security narratives, illustrating how Australia aligns its policies with broader trends in deterrence-based migration control. At the meso level, the focus shifts to national policies and domestic enforcement mechanisms, highlighting how Australia manages asylum seekers within its territorial borders while maintaining offshore sites as a core part of its migration regime. This approach defines how humanitarian discourse is not just a justification for exclusion, but an active strategy in the governance of migration across global and national scales.

Macro level: a global landscape

Enforcement archipelagos and island enforcement

The signatory states of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention hold legal obligations towards refugees present within their territories. However, in an effort to evade these obligations, signatory states in the Global North have increasingly extended their borders beyond their own territories. These states have devised a range of preventive and deterrence-based strategies and practices, including the establishment of onshore and offshore islands, to block, redirect, and detain migrants outside their sovereign territory (Costello, 2015; Ghezelbash, 2020; Mountz, 2020).

These deterrence strategies, whether implemented within or beyond national borders, reflect a broader punitive logic underpinning migration governance. This punitive logic is conceptualized by Foucault (1977, p. 298) as the ‘carceral archipelago’: a geographically dispersed yet integrated punitive system designed to restrict mobility and limit access to asylum. Mountz (2020) expands on this concept with her term ‘archipelagic sovereignty,’ illustrating how states extend their control beyond their own borders to exert transnational influence over migration. These strategies deliberately restrict opportunities for individuals to seek asylum through a combination of extraterritorial detention, deterrence mechanisms, and legal obfuscation.

The global refugee regime, founded on the 1951 Refugee Convention, faces unprecedented threats as Global North states attempt to limit their responsibilities while publicly affirming their commitments to refugee protection. Scholars argue that the post-WWII international refugee system is fragmenting due to conflicting interests between developing and developed countries (Betts, 2011; Crisp, 2003; Gibney, 2004; Mountz, 2020; Orchard, 2014).

Domestic politics increasingly prioritize border control and national security over humanitarian responsibilities, subjecting international refugee norms to scrutiny and reinterpretation (Orchard, 2014). States in the Global North frequently justify restrictive policies under the guise of national security, even as they claim to uphold humanitarian principles. This contradiction, as Gibney (2004) suggests, represents a 'schizophrenic' approach to asylum: while the principle of asylum remains rhetorically significant, enormous efforts are made to prevent asylum seekers from reaching sovereign territories where they could claim protection.

Islands, with their geographical isolation, legal ambiguity, and invisibility, serve as strategic tools in the enforcement of migration control (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006). Offshore detention islands physically and symbolically distance asylum seekers from legal protections and public scrutiny. The use of island prisons is a core feature of what Mountz (2011, 2020) describes as "enforcement archipelagos," a system of spatial containment that extends state power beyond its mainland borders. These archipelagos are not merely physical spaces but legal and bureaucratic instruments designed to evade accountability. Refugees held on islands exist in a state of legal limbo, where they are neither fully protected under international refugee law nor given access to the asylum systems of host states (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Welch, 2002). The increasing use of island detention centers and offshoring strategies signals the expansion of border enforcement beyond sovereign territory, reinforcing a form of extraterritorial governance that limits asylum access while concealing the violence of migration control (Mountz, 2020).

When individuals arrive at remote islands, their access to asylum becomes uncertain and is influenced by geographical distance (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Welch, 2002). Consequently, they exist in a state of limbo, caught between interstitial legal categories, and are not recognized as asylum seekers or refugee claimants. The pursuit of creating new spaces of confinement fuels

the increasing use of islands and the trend of creating island-like conditions elsewhere. Islands, both offshore and onshore, are mobilized to "contain human mobility and regulate access to rights that accrue on sovereign territory" (Mountz, 2020, p. 5). Apart from their geographical positioning as remote and detached from the mainland, other reasons for choosing islands as detention centers include exerting greater control over detainees, hiding refugees from media and human rights monitors, and restricting refugees' access to claiming their rights (Briskman, Latham, & Goddard, 2009).

The current borders of states in the Global North can be described as "exclusionary assemblages" designed to impede unwanted mobility (Mountz, 2020). Enforcement archipelagos extend the sovereign borders of states beyond their physical boundaries to exploit the exclusionary potentials of state power. The use of offshore islands as detention centers or the confinement of migrants in prisons exemplifies the replication of borders in various forms. Moreover, the policing and securitization of bodies, particularly those of refugees and asylum seekers, reinforce the concept of borders as a continuum that extends beyond geographical limits.

Externalization

The concept of externalization refers to the extension of border control measures beyond the territorial borders of receiving nations in the Global North to neighboring countries or even the migrants' countries of origin (Stock, Üstübcici, & Schultz, 2019). It encompasses a range of policies and practices aimed at slowing down or preventing asylum processing. Externalization is associated with terms like non-entrée, deterrence, offshoring, extraterritorialization, and protection elsewhere (Tan, 2021). Definitions mostly pertain to those measures employed by states beyond their territorial borders to prevent migrants from arriving or to prevent asylum-

seekers from accessing safe territory and seeking international protection (UNHCR, 2022 January 24). Externalization takes various forms, including interception, the establishment of offshore networks, increased transit visa requirements, the development of detention facilities in transit zones, and bilateral agreements for joint policing and repatriation (Mountz, 2020; Tan, 2021). However, the interception of individuals traveling by boat, followed by their detention and processing in offshore prisons by a party other than the government of where the refugee intended to declare asylum, is perhaps the most common manifestation of externalization (Crisp, 2021).

Australia is the largest executor of offshore processing since 2001 (Knaus & Doherty, 2022). Other countries have adopted similar models. For example, Israel made agreements with Uganda and Rwanda to relocate asylum seekers (Norris, 2022 April 14th), Denmark reached an agreement with Rwanda in 2022 (Ahmed, 2023 January 25th), and the UK signed the Rwanda Solution in 2022 (Beirens & Davidoff-Gore, 2022). Italy and Albania signed an agreement in November 2023 to establish detention facilities in Albania (De Pieri, 2023 Nov 7th). These examples show a trend of externalizing border control measures within the globe.

Externalization measures involve more than just state-state relations; they also entail subcontracting interactions with private companies such as airlines and transportation agencies responsible for passport and visa checks (Crisp, 2021; Stock et al., 2019). States often delegate responsibilities to third parties to carry out these measures without violating refugee law (Crisp, 2019). Detention centers are significant business ventures, with multinational corporations securing multimillion-dollar contracts to manage these sites. Manus Prison and the Nauru immigration detention center, for instance, have been highly profitable components of the Australian offshore detention regime for the multinational corporations involved (Tofighian,

2018). The Australian government has contracted several companies, including G4S, Salvation Army, Wilson, Paladin, JDA, Kingfisher, KNW, and International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), to provide food, transportation, security, and medical services for incarcerated asylum seekers in these prisons (Boochani, 2019 Feb 27th). Rather than providing humanitarian services to asylum seekers, the offshore detention regime, as observed in Australia, has turned into a competitive arena among multinational corporations. According to statistics, the cost of managing offshore detention in Australia from 2012 to 2020 exceeded 19 billion dollars (Equity Economics, 2019, p. 9). This means that the Australian government has spent an average of \$346,000 per person per year, while the cost of processing refugees within Australia on bridging visas does not exceed 10,221 dollars (ibid).

Understanding the privatization of the border industry can be enhanced by considering Butler conceptual framework of ‘petty sovereigns’ (2004). Petty sovereigns operate at the intersection of sovereignty and governmentality, representing bureaucratic regimes of governmentality that decentralize the restoration of sovereignty through governance. These entities are responsible for administrative functions that were once under the authority of states, and their assigned power allows them to make unilateral decisions without being accountable to the law (Butler, 2004). The complex border industry presents in Manus, Nauru, has ensured economic profits for the petty sovereigns involved in the externalized processing of asylum seekers.

In summary, any analysis of offshore detention must consider the economic profits generated by the border industry and the involvement of petty sovereigns in offshore detention operations. Ignoring these factors would lead to an incomplete understanding of the subject.

Meso level: a national outlook

In the Australian context, studying the offshore detention regime provides insights into the functioning of enforcement archipelagos. Australia has established itself as a leading player in offshore enforcement and migration detention on islands (Mountz, 2020). Through incentivized policy transfer, Australia has extended its border control strategies to neighboring countries. Under the label of regional cooperation, it has entered into various agreements with Southeast Asian nations to shift the responsibility for migration control onto external parties. These measures aim to prevent individuals deemed undesirable from reaching Australian territory, even when they are far from its borders (Hirsch, 2017).

These agreements have had significant consequences. Southeast Asian countries that are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention have assumed responsibility for enforcing Australia's border controls. However, the practices stemming from these agreements have proven unsustainable for local island nations, leading to the detention of refugees who, under different circumstances, may have been eligible for asylum (Higgins, 2017, September 8). This arrangement raises critical questions about the effectiveness and fairness of externalized border controls, as well as their broader humanitarian consequences. Studying Australia's offshore detention regime offers a national-level perspective on enforcement archipelagos, highlighting the mechanisms and impacts of externalization within this specific context.

Colonial mentality, neocolonial relations

Australia's offshore detention regime is deeply embedded in the enduring dynamics of settler-colonialism. Patrick Wolfe's (2006) concept of the 'logic of elimination' provides a critical lens

for understanding how anti-asylum policies echo colonial strategies of dispossession and marginalization. As Wolfe emphasizes, settler-colonialism is not a historical event but an ongoing structure that systematically displaces Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups to secure land and resources for settlers. At the core of this structure is the practice of ‘displacement and substitution’ (Veracini, 2010), which replaces marginalized groups with settlers while erasing their cultural, political, and spatial presence. This erasure severs their connections to land, community, and identity, neutralizing competing claims to sovereignty and belonging. Such elimination consolidates settler dominance while delegitimizing Indigenous and marginalized voices.

The logic of elimination operates through both physical displacement and cultural erasure. Settler governance redefines land as ‘empty’ and available for exploitation, historically justified through the doctrine of terra nullius (Reynolds, 1996). These colonial structures remain entrenched in modern governance (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2010), prioritizing settler claims while disregarding Indigenous sovereignty. Australia’s offshore detention regime represents a contemporary iteration of these colonial practices, reinforcing patterns of dispossession that sever marginalized communities from their lands, rights, and histories. This process sustains the structural inequalities of the settler state, ensuring its dominance at the expense of those considered outside the national body.

The Colonial Logic of Exclusion in Migration Policies

The settler-colonial logic of exclusion resurfaces in Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Through the relocation of individuals to offshore detention centers on islands like Nauru and Manus, or their detention within mainland facilities, the state employs spatial

strategies of exclusion that mirror colonial mechanisms of marginalization (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2010). Offshore detention centers, deliberately located away from the Australian mainland, create a geographic and political separation that isolates asylum seekers from public visibility and places them beyond the reach of international legal protections (Mountz, 2011). This physical distancing serves both a practical function and a symbolic purpose, reinforcing state sovereignty and territorial control while continuing the colonial project of excluding those deemed undesirable or threatening to the settler order (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Weber & Pickering, 2011).

Furthermore, Australia's offshore detention system reproduces a colonial logic of erasure, systematically diminishing the political agency and visibility of refugees. Much like the colonial displacement and marginalization of Indigenous peoples, the detention system silences and immobilizes asylum seekers (Wolfe, 2006). By denying them access to Australia's legal and political frameworks and confining them to remote, isolated spaces, the state renders them invisible and powerless (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Mountz, 2011). These practices do not merely reflect colonial history but actively reproduce the dynamics of colonial domination, where exclusion and control function as tools of governance (Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012).

Lisa Lowe (2015) situates these mechanisms of exclusion within the broader history of empire, highlighting how colonial regimes have long depended on exclusion, exploitation, and displacement. In Australia, the geographic separation of offshore detention centers parallels what Edward Said (1978) describes as 'imaginative geographies'; the mental and physical divisions that confine 'othered' groups to the margins. These divisions keep refugees out of sight while perpetuating narratives that portray them as external threats. By placing asylum seekers on remote islands, Australia enforces their invisibility while justifying their exclusion from legal

protections and fundamental rights. Examining Australia's history as a colonial nation-state provides crucial insights into its current border regime and regional influence. The treatment of those deemed 'outsiders' is deeply embedded in Australia's colonial imaginary, which continues to shape its institutions and policies (Tofighian, 2020).

Contradictions in Australia's Migration Policies: The Settler-Colonial Logic of Selective Belonging

However, contradictions within Australia's asylum policies reveal the colonial logic of selective belonging, where the state presents itself as a humanitarian protector while actively excluding those deemed a threat to settler order. A notable example of these contradictions is found in the statements of Scott Morrison, Australia's Minister for Immigration and Border Protection from 2013 to 2015. Morrison's government was known for its hardline anti-asylum policies, yet in 2014, he reaffirmed Australia's commitment to refugee protection, stating that his government would continue supporting refugees in conflict zones through humanitarian programs. However, in the same speech, he diminished the right to seek asylum for those arriving by boat, emphasizing that Australia had stopped processing permanent visas for those who arrived "illegally" and touting the policy as a successful strategy for stopping "the flow of boats" (Australian Parliament, 2014, August 17).

This rhetoric reflects the settler-colonial logic of containment and exclusion. While Australia portrays itself as a humanitarian actor, it actively works to prevent certain racialized groups from entering the settler state, echoing historical practices where Indigenous populations were forcibly confined to missions, reserves, and prisons to maintain settler dominance (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). As Gibney (2004) suggests, the asylum policies of many developed

countries are fundamentally contradictory, where "great importance is attached to the principle of asylum, but enormous efforts are made to ensure that refugees (and others with less pressing claims) never reach the territory of the state where they could receive its protection" (Gibney, 2004, p. 2).

By externalizing migration enforcement onto former colonies and economically dependent island nations, Australia perpetuates neocolonial governance, where sovereignty is selectively imposed on weaker states to serve settler interests (Mountz, 2020). The offshore detention regime not only reinforces exclusionary migration policies but also maintains Australia's regional dominance by outsourcing its border control responsibilities to states with fewer legal protections for asylum seekers (Hirsch, 2017). Consequently, refugees are unable to fully exercise the rights granted to them under international law unless they have access to a state that can guarantee their safety and dignity (Hirsch, 2017).

These contradictions reveal how Australia's offshore detention regime is not merely a legal mechanism of exclusion but a strategic political instrument designed to reinforce national sovereignty and territorial control at the direct expense of displaced populations. By externalizing border enforcement, the state projects a humanitarian image on the international stage while simultaneously enacting restrictive and punitive policies that ensure asylum seekers are physically barred from reaching Australian territory. This dual strategy allows Australia to uphold its commitments to refugee protection in rhetoric while systematically undermining access to asylum in practice, preserving its authority over migration governance while evading legal and ethical accountability.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Australia's offshore detention regime operates as a system of exclusion, designed to keep asylum seekers physically, legally, and politically out of reach.

Although framed as a humanitarian initiative, the reality is far more punitive. Offshore detention functions as a highly securitized system that subject asylum seekers to indefinite confinement, legal uncertainty, and enforced invisibility. The discussion in this chapter has demonstrated how humanitarian justifications conceal the structural violence embedded within the system, allowing the state to present itself as compassionate while systematically preventing asylum seekers from accessing protection.

At a global level, Australia's approach reflects a broader trend among Global North states, where border enforcement is no longer confined to territorial boundaries. Instead, it has evolved into a transnational apparatus that relocates migration control beyond sovereign borders. Offshore detention forms part of a widespread strategy that externalizes responsibility for refugees while maintaining strict control over entry and belonging. Through privatization, outsourcing, and legal obfuscation, Australia ensures that asylum seekers remain trapped in legal and geographic limbo. At a national level, this chapter has highlighted the historical continuities between settler-colonial governance and contemporary migration policies. Just as settler-colonial practices displaced and contained Indigenous populations, today's border enforcement mechanisms erase, exclude, and control those deemed undesirable. The Australian government justifies these measures through the language of care, framing restrictive policies as protective rather than punitive. However, this humanitarian-security logic does more than enforce exclusion. It systematically strips asylum seekers of their agency and redefines them as subjects of control rather than individuals with rights.

The contradictions within Australia's asylum policies reveal a deliberate strategy rather than an unintended consequence. While international law affirms the right to seek asylum, Australia has developed policies that make exercising this right nearly impossible. By maintaining an outward commitment to refugee protection while enacting restrictive border measures, the state ensures that asylum seekers remain at a distance, both geographically and legally. This allows Australia to uphold its humanitarian reputation while, in practice, creating insurmountable barriers to asylum.

This chapter provides the foundation for Chapter 4, which moves beyond structural critiques to focus on the lived experiences and resistance of detainees. Offshore detention is designed to isolate and immobilize, yet asylum seekers do not remain passive within this system. They resist, organize, and reclaim their narratives, challenging the structures that attempt to erase them. Chapter 4 will examine these acts of defiance, illustrating how detainees navigate and subvert the conditions imposed upon them. By shifting the focus to agency, resilience, and collective resistance, the next chapter highlights how migrants challenge systems designed to silence them.

Chapter 4:

Policies, practices, and resistance on Manus Prison: a timeline of key
events

Policies, practices, and resistance on Manus Prison: A timeline of key events

Introduction

This chapter builds on the broader framework established in Chapter 3, shifting from macro-level critiques to an analysis of the micro-level dynamics that shape the lived experiences and resistance of asylum seekers at Manus Prison. The chapter presents a timeline of key events in Australia's offshore detention regime while integrating individual and collective acts of resistance that contested these policies and practices on the ground. At the heart of this analysis is Behrouz Boochani, an outspoken detainee whose creative opposition to the violence of indefinite detention turned him into one of the most significant voices exposing Australia's punitive offshore system (Doherty, 2019).

The chapter explores how detainees navigated and resisted the offshore detention regime, revealing the intersection of state power, bureaucratic dehumanization, and carceral control with acts of agency and defiance. Through this lens, I discuss that resistance is not merely a reaction to state oppression but an active process of reclaiming subjectivity and political agency.

Bridging Structural Critiques with Lived Realities

Building on the macro-level critiques of Chapter 3, which examined Australia's exclusionary migration policies and offshore detention architecture, this chapter zooms in on the lived realities of detainees to reveal how resistance unfolds under extreme conditions. It conceptualizes resistance through the lens of creative subjectivation, a framework that highlights how detainees employed artistic, literary, and collective political strategies to assert their dignity and political subjectivity despite systemic efforts to render them invisible. Using the creative subjectivation framework, the discussions in this chapter explore how Manus detainees engaged

in acts of resistance through three interrelated processes: *disidentification*, *demands for democratic values*, and *reconfiguration*. By tracing these processes, the chapter highlights how Manus detainees subverted the detention regime, exposing its contradictions and challenging its legitimacy. Drawing on a diverse range of sources, including journalistic articles, social media posts, academic studies, government documents, and firsthand interviews, this chapter constructs a multi-perspective narrative of life inside Manus Prison. These interviews, conducted with four former detainees, alongside activists, artists, and writers, provide insights into both the institutional structures of detention and the individual strategies of resistance that remain underreported in mainstream discourse.

The key research question guiding this chapter is: What structural and operational components of the offshore detention model contribute to the disempowerment of refugees on-site, and how can detained asylum seekers raise their political subjectivity within this environment? The analysis ultimately reveals that progressive political subjectivity (most notably in the case of Boochani) can emerge even within the most marginalizing spaces of migration control.

The timeline of events in this chapter is structured chronologically but also thematically grouped, reflecting the evolution of resistance strategies over time. This dual approach helps illustrate both policy shifts and detainees' responses, making clear how state governance and asylum seeker agency shaped one another in an ongoing struggle over sovereignty, rights, and recognition.

Punitive Governance and the Politics of Deterrence

Manus Island is part of Manus Province in northern Papua New Guinea (PNG), located in the Bismarck Sea, 320 kilometers north of mainland PNG (Figure 2). The island has a population of around 50,000 people, who primarily rely on subsistence farming and fishing for their livelihood. Historically, Manus Island has been subjected to external control and exploitation. During the interwar period, Manus became a mandated territory under Australian administration, later serving as a strategic naval base during the Korean War (Fitzpatrick, 2016).

Boochani (2017) argues that the island's history of forced occupation, colonial administration, and land dispossession directly links to its use as a detention site, reflecting broader patterns of Western domination over Pacific territories (Tofighian & Boochani, 2020). After World War II, Manus was placed under Australian governance through a United Nations trusteeship agreement before PNG's independence in 1975. This legacy of external rule set the stage for Australia's later use of Manus as a carceral space, once again imposing foreign control over the island and its resources.

The Establishment of Manus Prison: A Regime of Deterrence

Between 2001 and 2009, and again from 2013 to 2017, Manus Island functioned as an offshore prison for asylum seekers deemed undesirable by Australia. Under Operation Sovereign Borders, established in 2013 as a military-led border security initiative, Australia expanded its deterrence policies, forcibly transferring asylum seekers to offshore detention centers on Manus Island and Nauru. This offshore detention model functioned as a legal and political gray zone, where detainees were subjected to indefinite incarceration under conditions widely condemned by human rights organizations as cruel, inhuman, and torturous (Amnesty International, 2013).

Under this regime, asylum seekers were permanently denied the possibility of gaining residency in Australia, leaving them in a perpetual state of legal uncertainty and personal instability. Stripped of any pathway to a secure future, they remained trapped in a system that offered no resolution, neither the right to settle nor the freedom to move forward, forcing them into an existence defined by limbo, displacement, and insecurity.

I intentionally use the term *Manus Prison* to highlight that this was not merely a neutral bureaucratic detention system but an apparatus of punitive governance. Detention was not simply an administrative tool but a deliberate strategy aimed at breaking detainees' psychological resilience. By prolonging uncertainty, denying basic freedoms, and isolating detainees from legal protections, Australian authorities sought to make the experience of seeking asylum so unbearable that it would deter future arrivals.

The systemic cruelty of Manus was so extreme that international human rights organizations classified the detention regime as violating fundamental principles of human dignity and international law (Amnesty International, 2013). Despite the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruling in 2017 that Manus Prison was unconstitutional and illegal, asylum seekers were not granted immediate freedom. Instead, they were relocated to alternative facilities, maintaining the same conditions of indefinite detention but under different labels. Even after Australia's offshore detention program in Manus officially ended in 2022, its legacy persists in the lives of those subjected to its policies. Many former detainees remain in precarious conditions, either stranded in PNG with limited legal status or attempting to rebuild their lives in third countries under restrictive resettlement programs. The end of Manus did not signify the end of deterrence-based migration control; it marked the adaptation of the offshore system into new forms of exclusion and bureaucratic cruelty.



Figure 2 *Map of Papua New Guinea, Manus Island, and its neighbors*

Source: (Smyth, 2017)

Subverting punitive governance: the power of creative subjectivation

Creative subjectivation emerges as a counterforce to punitive governance, enabling refugees to reclaim agency and identity in the face of systemic oppression. It provides a pathway for individuals to navigate and resist the restrictive regimes of migration control. Resistance in this context is multi-layered, challenging the interconnected abuses embedded within Manus Prison's regime. Within the bureaucratic maze of Manus, in a web of shifting policies, detainees could easily find themselves trapped in legal ambiguity, and overlapping systems of control (ranging from physical confinement to psychological coercion). In such an environment, resistance is not merely an option; it is an existential imperative, a means of both survival and defiance against a system built to silence and erase them. Through creative initiatives, refugees navigate the constraints of their imposed condition, reclaiming authorship over their own narratives in direct opposition to the state's disciplinary gaze. This act of reclaiming can be seen as a strategic

intervention in a system designed to strip them of subjectivity. Their creative expressions, whether in literature, film, or digital activism—do not function merely as artistic outlets but as radical disruptions of the structures that attempt to confine them. In transforming their experiences into acts of political and cultural production, they expose the contradictions within the logic of deterrence itself: a system that seeks silence, yet inadvertently amplifies, the voices of those it seeks to suppress.

This process of creative subjectivation unfolds through three interrelated layers: *disidentification*, *demands for democratic values*, and *acts of reconfiguration*. Disidentification, the rejection of imposed identities—serves as a catalyst for broader political claims, including the demand for equality, freedom, and the right to seek asylum. These claims, in turn, materialize through acts of reconfiguration, where detainees disrupt dominant narratives and reshape the socio-political landscape surrounding them.

This study highlights this process of creative subjectivation by tracing the creative journey of Behrouz Boochani, whose interventions challenge the enforced invisibility of the detention regime. By placing Boochani's creative defiance at the center of this analysis, this chapter explores the diverse ways in which detainees use creativity to resist subjugation, assert their identities, and influence global discourses on migration and border control. In addition to documenting key moments in Australia's offshore detention regime, this chapter focuses on the personal and collective strategies through which refugees on Manus have contested their marginalization. Their resistance, whether through literature, film, journalism, or direct action illustrates the power of refugees in challenging and reshaping the systems that seek to erase them.

Part one 2001-2015: trials and errors of a brutal regime

The first phase of Australia's offshore detention policies reveals the establishment of punitive governance and the strategic resistance that emerged among asylum seekers. During this period, the *Pacific Solution* was introduced, dismantled, and subsequently reintroduced with heightened severity under the 19th of July Policy. This period illustrates the evolving tension between the Australian government's efforts to normalize offshore detention and the detainees' ability to challenge these policies through collective and individual resistance. The implementation of the Pacific Solution and its subsequent re-establishment underlines the intersection of political opportunism and systemic dehumanization. Resistance during this time focused primarily on physical survival and small-scale protests, highlighting the foundational aspects of detainee agency in oppressive conditions.

2001: The Pacific Solution and the creation of extraterritorial detention

- The Pacific Solution, a policy initiated by newly elected Liberal Prime Minister John Howard in 2001, fundamentally changed Australia's approach to asylum seekers arriving by boat. Under this policy asylum seekers were intercepted at sea and transferred to offshore detention centers on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island (Davidson, 2016 November 13th). Ostensibly aimed at deterring unauthorized arrivals and disrupting human trafficking, the policy instead created an extraterritorial legal vacuum where normal human rights protections did not apply. These offshore facilities have been widely criticized for their inhumane conditions, effectively criminalizing individuals who, under international law, are entitled to seek asylum. Between 2001 and 2008, thousands of asylum seekers were detained,

but this study primarily focuses on the second iteration of the *Pacific Solution*, reintroduced in 2012.

2008: A temporary end to offshore detention

- The Labor government, led by Kevin Rudd, closed all offshore detention centers, relocating the final group of asylum seekers to Australia on February 8, 2008 (Karlsen, 2016 December 19). Rudd's government condemned the *Pacific Solution* as a costly, cynical, and ultimately ineffective political maneuver (Evans, 2008). While some regarded this as the end of Australia's offshore detention era (Rummery, 2008 February 11th), the closure did not signal a humanitarian shift. Instead, the government repurposed Christmas Island as a new site for asylum processing. By excising certain territories, including Christmas Island, from Australia's *migration zone* under the Migration Act 1958 (Australian Government, 1958), asylum seekers who arrived there were denied the legal rights afforded to those arriving on the mainland. This legal maneuver allowed Australia to continue restrictive immigration policies under the guise of reform.

2012: The revival of offshore detention

- Prime Minister Julia Gillard reinstated offshore detention, transferring individuals to Nauru (September 14, 2012) and Manus Island (November 21, 2012) (Karlsen, 2016). By relaunching this punitive model, the government framed it as a necessary measure to prevent so-called 'queue-jumping' and to deny an 'unfair advantage' to those arriving by boat over those using so-called regular pathways. (Bowen, 2012 September 14th). This rhetoric intentionally masked deep-rooted inequalities and life-threatening conditions that compel people to seek asylum by sea. The decision deepened political divisions, reinforcing hardline

immigration policies across party lines. As the 2013 federal election approached, asylum seekers became a key battleground for political opportunism. Despite the Labor Party's historical stance on refugee protection, Gillard's government embraced punitive measures in an apparent bid to appeal to voters favoring stricter border controls, demonstrating the bipartisan entrenchment of deterrence as state policy.

2013: The July 19th Policy and permanent exclusion from Australia

- On July 19, 2013, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd introduced a hardline policy banning all asylum seekers arriving by boat from ever settling in Australia:

From now on, any asylum seeker who arrives in Australia by boat will have no chance of being settled in Australia as refugees. Asylum seekers taken to Christmas Island will be sent to Manus and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea for assessment of their refugee status. If they are found to be genuine refugees they will be resettled in Papua New Guinea, an emerging economy with a strong future; a robust democracy which is also a signatory to the United Nations Refugees Convention. If they found not to be genuine refugees, they may be repatriated to their country of origin or be sent to a safe third country other than Australia (Rudd, 2013 July 19th).

Rudd's government justified the policy as a deterrence strategy amid growing political support for stricter border controls ([Karlsen, 2016](#)). The *Regional Resettlement Arrangement*, signed the same day, formalized Manus as a permanent detention site in exchange for \$400 million in Australian aid to Papua New Guinea ([BBC, 2016 April 28th](#)). The arrangement then extended to Nauru as another participating regional State ([Rudd, 2013 August 3rd](#)). While the processing centres on Manus were allocated for single adult male asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors and family groups were transferred to Nauru according to the arrangements. By December 2013, the number of asylum seekers forcibly transferred to Manus reached 1,353, while Nauru housed 1,233 ([Refugee Council of Australia, 2024 February](#)). Despite these measures, Rudd's policy shift failed to secure electoral victory, and

in September 2013, Tony Abbott's Liberal-National Coalition took power, continuing the offshore detention regime.

Rudd's July 19th policy announcement transformed Manus into a space of permanent exile.. For Mardin, a Kurdish asylum seeker who arrived just before the policy took effect, the shift was devastating. Mardin, a Kurdish asylum seeker, spent eight years in Australian detention facilities (including seven years in offshore locations such as Manus Prison and Port Moresby and one year onshore in Melbourne). I interviewed him in 2021, while he was still under detention in a prison hotel in Melbourne, awaiting an uncertain future. He recalled his initial relief upon reaching Christmas Island, believing he had finally found safety after a harrowing journey across the ocean: When we reached Christmas Island, I felt I was born again. I was really happy. I remember when I was on the deck, I saw two people running. Then I felt myself, because I love walking and running. I was thinking, if I could do the same, I could go running and jogging without being worried. I had survived (interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Park Hotel Prison, Melbourne via Zoom). This hope was swiftly shattered as detainees were informed under the July 19th Policy that they would never be allowed to settle in Australia and would be forcibly transferred to Manus Island.

It was a big shock. I had risked my life at sea, faced death every second on those boats. And now they told us we would be sent to Manus. The guards even tried to prepare us by saying the Manusians were 'cannibals.' It was a nightmare (interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Park Hotel Prison, Melbourne via Zoom).

Aref, another participant in my project, is also a former refugee who spent over six years in offshore detention. I spoke with Aref in January 2021, less than a year after he had relocated to the United States as part of a deal with America. Now in his mid-40s, he continues to work and live in Atlanta. Aref described his forced transition to Manus Island as follows:

They gathered us and said, ‘There is a new law: If you come to Australia by boat, you will never be settled here.’ They told us we had two options, go to Manus or return to our home countries. But going back meant facing the same dangers we had fled from. It wasn’t a choice; it was a sentence.” (interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta Gorgia via Zoom).

The sudden shift in policy illustrates how bureaucratic decisions can instantly and irreversibly alter the lives of vulnerable individuals. The so-called ‘choice’ between indefinite detention and forced repatriation (despite international prohibitions against refoulement) was nothing more than state-sanctioned exile.

In December 2013, Amnesty International published a 123-page report, condemning conditions on Manus, stating that detainees were subjected to “cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment” (Amnesty International, 2013). A UNHCR report followed, explicitly classifying the indefinite and arbitrary nature of detention as a breach of international law (UNHCR, 2013 October). Taken together, these reports validated allegations of systemic human rights abuses within Australia’s offshore facilities, from both humanitarian and legal standpoints. They highlighted the urgent need for policy revisions, and the moral and legal imperatives facing Australia in its treatment of vulnerable populations. Moreover, the alignment between the findings of two respected international organizations raises serious questions about the ongoing viability and ethics of Australia’s offshore detention policies.

2014: Escalation of violence and systematic neglect; riots, murder, and the struggles for dignity in Manus

- Between February 16–18, 2014, widespread riots erupted at the Manus Island Detention Centre, culminating in the brutal killing of Reza Barati, a 23-year-old Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker. On the night of February 17, local contractors and security staff stormed the

facility, beating Reza to death with wood and rocks (Cornal, 2014). Aref, a participant in my study and a relative of Barati, recalled their last conversation just two hours before Reza's death:

He told me the riot might continue, and there will be violence. Stay in your room. Do not come out. Reza did not want to be part of it. But later, as the riot escalated, he left the internet room to join the others. As he walked down the stairs, they hit his head with a stick. He tried to shield himself, but another blow struck him. He fell, and they kicked him until he died." (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, USA).

The violence extended across the detention centre, injuring 77 people, including 13 with critical injuries, such as gunshot wounds and skull fractures (Davidson & Laughland, 2014).

The Australian Senate later confirmed that the riots were "eminently foreseeable", exacerbated by prolonged detention, lack of information, and growing despair among detainees (Australian Parliament, 2014 December 11th p. 145). The events on 19th of February followed escalating protests at the different compounds of the centre for several days when asylum seekers "became agitated during a meeting about their future resettlement prospects" (Davidson and Cordell, 2014 Feb 17th n.p).

Aref, an eyewitness, traced the immediate trigger of the protests to a meeting with Papua New Guinea's Immigration and Citizenship Service officers:

We had been waiting for months—some for over six months—for interviews or case decisions. We wanted clarity and freedom. Instead, they told us we had no future in Australia. Our only options were to be resettled in Papua New Guinea or return home. But PNG offered nothing, no jobs, no education, no safety. The representatives warned the officers that if they told us this, there would be chaos. The officers insisted. Within minutes, chairs were broken, people were kicked, and the protests began." (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, USA).

The authorities had prepared for unrest, having removed flammable objects, chairs, and stones from the compounds two days before the announcement. Their actions reveal

premeditated containment strategies rather than any real attempt to resolve detainees' growing desperation.

- In September 2014, Hamid Khazaei, a 24-year-old Iranian asylum seeker, died from medical negligence after developing a simple leg infection while detained on Manus (Robertson, 2018 July 30). Despite showing signs of severe illness, he was denied timely medical evacuation. By the time he was airlifted to Australia, he had developed sepsis, leading to organ failure and death (Ryan, 2018 p. 1). A 128-page coroner's report found systematic failures in healthcare at Manus, concluding that:

Had Mr. Khazaei been evacuated to Australia within 24 hours of developing severe sepsis, he would have survived." (Ryan, 2018 p. 3).

Khazaei's death exposed the deliberate neglect of medical care as an additional mechanism of cruelty within the offshore system. The denial of treatment not only prolonged suffering but also reinforced the government's strategy of deterrence through degradation (Tahana, 2018 July 31).

- In November 2014, an ABC News investigation revealed that asylum seekers at Manus were subjected to torture, physical assaults, rape threats, and coercion into signing false witness statements about Barati's murder (Sami, 2014 November 3rd). The report also exposed the existence of Chauka, a secret solitary confinement unit within Manus that "did not appear on any official detention infrastructure maps" (Doherty & Evershed, 2014 December 12th). Mardin, a participant in my study who spent two nights in Chauka, described his experience:

Around 20 of us were taken to a penal colony called Chauka. We were kept and harassed there for two days. I was weak because of the hunger strike, and I wanted to lie down and sleep. But I'll never forget that an Australian security would come and wake me up, he would tap my body by his feet and call my name, not my name, by my ID number: "MEG65". I would say yes, and he said: "sleep!" Again, after an hour, I would sleep, and

he would tap my body: “MEG65”?! (interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Park Hotel Prison, Melbourne via Zoom).

Mardin’s testimony exposes Chauka as a space of dehumanization, where detainees were reduced to numbers, denied rest, and subjected to psychological torture. This aligns with broader critiques of offshore detention as a mechanism of punishment rather than processing. A regime that actively sought to erase human dignity rather than provide asylum.

2015: Hunger strikes, global condemnation, and literary defiance; resistance and repression on Manus

- In January, seventeen months after the implementation of the 19th of July policy, the second-largest unrest following the February 2014 riot escalated on Manus Island. A hunger strike initiated by a group of detainees in December 2014 intensified into greater tension in January 2015. The protests began when four men in the Oscar compound sewed their lips together. They were soon joined by approximately half of the individuals from the same group, who also refused food as part of the hunger strike (Doherty, 2014 December 4th).

Aref, an eyewitness and former Manus detainee, described the desperation that drove them to protest:

The strike lasted for 15 days. At its peak, 800 out of 900 detainees refused food. Some collapsed from dehydration after just four or five days. When someone fainted, officers would drag their body across the ground, making sure everyone saw. Then they’d put them on an IV drip, wake them up, and leave them by the fence. It was psychological warfare.” (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, USA).

The scale of the hunger strike revealed the collective desperation of detainees, many of whom had been imprisoned for over 17 months with no path to asylum (Farrel, 2014 November 12). A lack of information forced resettlement plans in Papua New Guinea (PNG),

and degrading conditions fueled the unrest. By the end of 2014, only 10 out of over 1,000 asylum seekers had been granted visas (Farrel, 2014 November 12).

On January 13th, over 100 detainees from the Mike compound initiated the hunger strike. Within days, those from Foxtrot, Delta, and Oscar compounds joined in, with 15 detainees sewing their lips shut as an extreme act of protest (Doherty, 2015 January 27th). Other detainees swallowed razor blades and detergent, symbolizing the violent control of their own bodies as a rejection of state violence (Evershed & Doherty, 2015 Jan 19th). The strike ended on January 21st when Australian authorities stormed the camps, arrested 60 detainees identified as ‘ringleaders,’ and transferred them to Lorengau jail (Doherty, 2015 January 27). Aref recalled how the authorities targeted those who spoke English, assuming they were the leaders:

They chose around 50 people, anyone who knew English. They guessed those people were the leaders. They handcuffed them, took them in a car, and the rest of us were scared. To protect them, we ended the strike (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, USA)

Among those detained was Behrouz Boochani, who had been documenting the hunger strike and communicating with journalists and advocates outside Manus. His reporting was effective in exposing the brutal crackdown on protesters, countering the Australian government’s efforts to silence detainees and conceal the realities of offshore detention. The state’s strategy of criminalizing protest, imprisoning leaders, and suppressing communication reflected its broader attempt to dismantle resistance within its offshore prison regime.

As Aretxaga (1992) argues, the body itself becomes a weapon of resistance against structures of power that attempt to erase political agency. On Manus, detainees’ hunger strikes and acts of self-harm served as radical refusals of their imposed invisibility. The hunger strike on

Manus was not just an act of protest but, in Rancière's terms (1999), a radical disruption of the political and sensory order imposed by the Australian state. By forcing their suffering into visibility, detainees shattered the state's attempt to erase them from public consciousness. Through both bodily resistance and journalistic interventions like Boochani's, they exposed the offshore detention system not just as an issue of policy but as a moral and political crisis. This collective action on Manus marked a pivotal moment in contesting a migration regime that systematically violated basic human rights (McGregor, 2014 February 21).

- The hunger strike's suppression did not go unnoticed. In March 2015, the United Nations' Human Rights Council (UNHRC) formally accused Australia of violating the UN Convention Against Torture (Mendez, 2015 p. 9). Juan Méndez, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, found that Australian immigration policies breached international law by arbitrarily detaining asylum seekers at sea and denying them access to legal representation. His report also highlighted the degrading and violent conditions detainees endured, including children, as well as the systematic use of psychological and physical mistreatment in regional processing centers (Méndez, 2015, p. 7-9).

The Australian government's response was dismissive. Prime Minister Tony Abbott deflected responsibility, stating, "I really think Australians are sick of being lectured to by the United Nations. We have stopped the boats, and by stopping the boats, we have ended the deaths at sea" (Doherty & Hurst, 2015 March 10th, n.p). Abbott's rhetoric of deterrence completely ignored the human suffering within Manus and Nauru, reducing asylum policy to a simplistic national security narrative. The UN's condemnation further delegitimized Australia's offshore regime, amplifying international pressure on the government while

exposing the widening gulf between Australia's migration policies and its human rights obligations.

- While Manus detainees continued to be silenced, punished, and ignored, Behrouz Boochani found a way to resist from within. On November 15, 2015, in recognition of the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer, The Guardian published an article by Ben Doherty acknowledging Boochani as a journalist and writer, imprisoned yet active in exposing Manus to the world (Doherty, 2015 November 14th). For years, Boochani had been anonymously leaking stories from inside Manus, smuggling a cellphone into the prison by bribing local employees. His first articles which had previously cited an 'anonymous Manus detainee' were now publicly acknowledged as his work. Boochani's resistance was not just about documentation but also about redefining agency under conditions of total control. His decision to go public carried immense risk revealing his name meant he could have his phone confiscated, cutting off his only link to the outside world. But it also made his work impossible to ignore. His writing was part of a broader resistance movement that sought to transform detainees from passive victims to active narrators of their own oppression. In this way, Boochani's work embodied creative subjectivation, using literary and journalistic interventions as tools for political struggle.

The period between 2001 and 2015 marks the institutionalization of offshore detention as a central pillar of Australia's migration regime, driven by an escalating logic of deterrence and dehumanization. Through successive policy shifts (from the Pacific Solution to the July 19th Policy) Australia experimented with increasingly restrictive and punitive measures, refining a system designed not to process asylum claims but to render certain lives unlivable. Yet, as the state sought to normalize indefinite detention, asylum seekers responded with defiant acts

of survival. From everyday struggles against degrading conditions to large-scale hunger strikes, detainees continuously challenged their enforced invisibility. The 2014 killing of Reza Barati, the 2015 hunger strike, and the systematic medical neglect that led to Hamid Khazaei's preventable death illustrate both the violent repression faced by detainees and the human cost of Australia's offshore regime. However, resistance was not only physical, it was also creative. Behrouz Boochani's emergence as an incarcerated journalist and writer symbolized a crucial shift: detainees were not merely passive victims but active subjects engaged in documenting, resisting, and reclaiming their narratives. As Australia doubled down on deterrence, detainees countered with acts of political agency, transforming Manus from a site of exclusion into a battleground of contestation. Part Two will explore how, despite intensified repression, this struggle continued, culminating in the eventual collapse of the Manus detention regime.

Part Two (2016–2017): From Survival to Collective Resistance

The period from 2016 onward marks a crucial turning point in resistance on Manus. While previous years had already seen collective protests, including hunger strikes, riots, and mass uprisings, these actions were often reactive responses to immediate crises (outbursts of frustration in the face of deteriorating conditions, state violence, and systemic neglect). In contrast, 2016-2017 saw a shift toward more sustained, strategic, and politically engaged forms of resistance. This phase of resistance was characterized by detainees asserting their legal rights, rejecting forced resettlement, and engaging in performative resistance that exposed the contradictions of Australia's deterrence policies. Unlike earlier protests, which were often crushed through brutal suppression, this period saw detainees directly challenge the system through legal battles, symbolic acts of contestation, and international advocacy.

The April 2016 Supreme Court ruling, hunger strikes, and public defiance led by Behrouz Boochani transformed detainees from invisible subjects of state control into visible political actors. Their resistance forced Australia and Papua New Guinea to confront the failures of offshore detention, destabilizing the legitimacy of the system. This shift (from immediate survival and reactive protests to sustained contestation) marks the beginning of the end of Manus Island's detention regime.

2016: Legal victories and symbolic Resistance

- In April 2016, 161 detained asylum seekers on Manus Island wrote a letter to the UNHCR branch in Australia, requesting resettlement in any of the 27 countries involved in the official UNHCR resettlement program, but not in Papua New Guinea. They explicitly rejected resettlement in PNG, stating:

There are just 27 countries in the world that participate in UNHCR resettlement programs. We would like to [be] resettled in each [any] of these. PNG is not one of them (Doherty and Davidson, 2016, April 18th).

Addressing the Australian public, the detainees stated that they did not insist on being resettled in Australia if “Australian people are not happy” (Doherty and Davidson, 2016, April 18th). This statement, both defiant and ironic, revealed the power asymmetry embedded in Australia's offshore detention regime—asylum seekers were being punished not for breaking laws, but for seeking safety in a country that actively sought to erase them.

- One of the most symbolic moments of resistance occurred on April 24, 2016, when Behrouz Boochani climbed a tree to resist forced relocation to a pre-release center. Boochani had refused to apply for asylum in PNG and rejected the positive refugee status determination that had been imposed on him against his will. His act of defiance was both

physical and political, as he used his body and words to challenge the entire logic of offshore detention.

“I am here for my political values and Western civilization values... I want to resist. They must take me by force.” (Wahlquist & Doherty, 2016 April 24th).

Boochani later expanded on his act of resistance in a written statement sent to the media:

I have worked hard and tirelessly for three years to send out Manus’ voice. I wrote articles in my real name and a fake name. I worked with filmmakers, journalists, organizations, and lawyers. But now I want to send out Manus’ voice with my body. I don’t want to lose my personality. I don’t want to be a nameless detainee. By the 19 July law, our legal status has been suspended. We have been made into non-beings, without dignity.” (Boochani, unpublished article, Nauru and Manus Islands and the Law: The State of Exception)

This embodied protest aligns with Rancière’s concept of disrupting the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 1999). By refusing to be processed in PNG, Boochani asserted his agency in a system designed to strip detainees of individual identity. His resistance was not just about his own fate, it was an explicit challenge to Australia’s entire offshore detention system. His solo protest later inspired the final scene of Manus, a play by Nazanin Sahamizadeh (2019), performed in Tehran, India, and Australia.

- On April 26, 2016, the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruled that offshore detention was unconstitutional and illegal. The Court determined that the asylum seekers had never intended to enter or remain in PNG and that their detention was in violation of PNG’s Constitution (PNG’s Supreme Court of Justice, 2016 April 26th). The ruling declared:

They did not enter PNG and do not remain in PNG on their own accord. Their forceful transfer and continued detention... is unconstitutional and illegal.” (PNG’s Supreme Court of Justice, 2016 April 26th).

The Court ordered both the Australian and PNG governments to immediately close the Manus Regional Processing Centre and lift the ban on cellphones, which had previously been enforced to isolate detainees from the outside world (Tofighian & Boochani, 2021).

Until April 2016, we couldn't use mobile phones. If we had any, we had to use them stealthily and only when security wasn't around." (interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Park Hotel Prison, Melbourne via Zoom).

This ruling marked a significant moment in the fight against offshore detention, affirming what detainees had long argued:

they were not in PNG voluntarily, nor was PNG a safe resettlement option. However, instead of complying, the Australian government continued its strategy of delay and externalization (PNG's Supreme Court of Justice, 2016 April 26th p. 15-16).

- In November 2016, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and U.S. President Barack Obama announced a one-off refugee swap deal. The U.S. agreed to resettle up to 1,250 refugees from Manus and Nauru, in exchange for Australia taking a group of refugees from Central America (Innis, 2016 November, 12th). While some detainees saw the deal as an escape route, others, including Behrouz Boochani, criticized it as a political maneuver designed to shift responsibility rather than address the injustices of offshore detention. Furthermore, extreme vetting policies under the Trump administration delayed the process, leaving many detainees in prolonged limbo (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, n.d.).
- In November 2016, a group of 730 asylum seekers and refugees from Manus Island, led by Behrouz Boochani, "filed an application for the enforcement of their constitutional rights (section 57 of the Constitution) and unlawful transfer and detention in Manus, after the Supreme Court ruled on 26 April, 2016 that their detention since 2013 was "unlawful" following the Supreme Court's ruling on April 26, 2016, that their detention since 2013 was unlawful (Pokiton, 2018 October 24th). The Supreme Court, although, dismissed the application later in 2018 "suggesting they had petitioned the wrong jurisdiction and should have instead gone to the national court" (Davidson, 2018 October 24th).

- In December 2016, 27-year-old Sudanese refugee Faysal Ishak Ahmed collapsed on Manus and died after delayed medical evacuation (Slezak & Doherty, 2017). An Australian coroner's report later found that:

“Faysal made frequent medical complaints between 2014 and his death, sometimes multiple times a day... Had he been medically evacuated sooner; he likely would have survived.” (Crockford, 2022).

His death underscored the systematic neglect within offshore detention, where medical care was deliberately restricted as part of Australia's deterrence policy.

The period from 2016 to 2017 represents a fundamental shift in resistance on Manus. Through legal challenges, strategic refusals, and international advocacy, detainees exposed the contradictions of Australia's offshore system and forced governments to acknowledge its failures. The April Supreme Court ruling, the hunger strikes, and Boochani's public protests among others transformed detainees into visible political actors. The refugees' resistance destabilized the offshore regime, of course, not through violence, but through legal battles, creative resistance, and collective action. While Australia continued to evade responsibility, detainees proved that they were not passive victims but active agents of political change.

Part three (the first part of 2017; Jan-Sep): Resistance, visibility, and the struggle for recognition

By 2017, Manus Island had transformed from an isolated offshore detention center into a globally recognized site of contested governance. Detainees were no longer just resisting the brutal conditions of their imprisonment; they were challenging the very legitimacy of the detention system itself. This period saw an intensification of both state efforts to suppress

resistance and detainees' ability to mobilize against oppressive governance. Building on years of mass hunger strikes, riots, and legal battles, 2017 marked the moment when resistance expanded beyond Manus itself. International scrutiny, detainee-led journalism, and a growing legal movement forced the Australian government to defend its offshore regime on a global stage. This phase saw a shift from reactive protests to proactive strategies that combined legal challenges, media engagement, and artistic interventions. Manus detainees had moved beyond the struggle for survival and into a battle for global recognition, leveraging international media, legal victories, and cultural productions to challenge Australia's system of offshore imprisonment.

The class-action lawsuit against the Australian government, the Good Friday shooting incident, and the release of Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time were not isolated events. Together, they demonstrated how Manus detainees, through both legal and creative means, had successfully forced offshore detention into global discourse. While previous legal victories had been suppressed or ignored, this moment marked a shift where the system's contradictions could no longer be hidden from public scrutiny. Boochani's film and reporting, along with other detainees' activism, transformed the detainees from nameless figures trapped in bureaucratic limbo into visible political actors. Creative resistance became a powerful tool, countering the dehumanizing narratives imposed by the Australian government and instead positioning the detainees as autonomous subjects, articulating their own experiences and demands. As detainee resistance gained global traction, Australia intensified efforts to suppress their voices. The PNG military attack on April 14, allegedly triggered by local tensions, reinforced the fragile and volatile conditions within Manus. Meanwhile, the US-Australia refugee deal became another political bargaining tool, where the fate of detainees was dictated by diplomatic spectacle rather than

humanitarian considerations. The diplomatic tensions between Malcolm Turnbull and Donald Trump, the denial of visas for Boochani to attend his film screenings, and the refusal to provide proper mental health care to detainees like Hamed Shamshiripour, all underscore how resistance on Manus was met with new forms of punishment, neglect, and political maneuvering.

- One week after Donald Trump's inauguration, and one day after signing the controversial 'Muslim Ban', the US President had a heated phone conversation with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on January 28, 2017. The discussion centered on the Obama-era refugee swap deal, which committed the US to resettle up to 1,250 refugees from Manus and Nauru in exchange for Australia taking refugees from Central America. Trump, who viewed the deal as politically damaging, described it as a 'stupid deal' that made him 'look terrible', comparing it to the Mariel boatlift, where Cuba had sent criminals to the US in 1980. He repeatedly implied that Manus detainees were dangerous, stating:

These were brutal people... I guarantee you they are bad. That is why they are in prison right now. (Miller, Vitkovskaya & Fischer-Baum, 2017).

Turnbull responded by openly admitting that Australia's detention system was designed purely as a deterrent, not because the detainees were dangerous:

It is not because they are bad people. It is because in order to stop people smugglers, we had to deprive them of the product.

Trump's response was saying:

That is a good idea. We should do that too. You are worse than I am. This conversation, later leaked to the media, exposed the brutal logic of offshore detention. Detainees were not imprisoned for crimes but as human shields to uphold Australia's border policies. It also highlighted the political nature of the refugee resettlement deal, which had little to do with humanitarian concerns and everything to do with diplomatic optics.

- On April 14, Papua New Guinea defense personnel launched a violent attack on the Manus detention center, firing multiple rounds into the compound. The attack, which injured nine people, was described as the result of "unethical and unacceptable behavior of drunken soldiers" ([BBC, 2017 October 31](#)). However, Australian officials attempted to justify the attack, claiming it was sparked by rumors that asylum seekers had led a five-year-old local boy into the compound. This version of events was disputed by PNG's Police Commissioner, who suggested that the soldiers had acted independently.

Behrouz Boochani, who had opened a Twitter account in January 2017, reported live from inside the detention center, challenging the official narrative. On April 15, he tweeted:

Some Australian staff didn't return to work bc of safety. If u can't provide safety to your citizens, how can you protect refugees? ([Boochani, 2017 April 15](#))

His real-time reporting transformed Manus detainees into citizen-journalists, undermining Australia's ability to control the narrative and exposing the contradictions of a system that claimed to ensure security while routinely endangering those in its custody.

- On June 14, 2017, a class-action lawsuit initiated in 2014 by the Slater and Gordon law firm reached a historic settlement. The Australian government agreed to pay \$70 million plus legal costs to 1,905 Manus detainees, marking the largest human rights class-action settlement in Australian history ([Doherty and Wahlquist, 2017 June 14th](#)). Andrew Baker, one of the lead lawyers, called the settlement a "moment of justice" ([Butler, 2017 June 13th](#)), while Boochani noted that it was "the first time" the refugees could "smell a little bit of justice from Australia" ([Doherty and Wahlquist, 2017 June 14th](#)). However, no formal apology was issued, and the ruling did not lead to any policy change. Instead, it reinforced

Australia's strategy of using financial settlements to neutralize legal threats while continuing offshore detention.

- On June 11, 2017, the documentary *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, co-directed by Behrouz Boochani and Iranian-Dutch filmmaker Arash Kamali Sarvestani, premiered at the Sydney Film Festival. The film was clandestinely shot inside the Manus detention center using a smuggled cellphone, with Boochani sending footage to Sarvestani over WhatsApp. Despite being officially invited to the festival, Boochani was denied a visa, preventing him from attending his own premiere. The film was a direct counter-narrative to the state's portrayal of offshore detention, using cinema as a political weapon to expose the reality of Manus. It exemplified how detainees were no longer just resisting through physical defiance, but through storytelling, film, and journalism.

On August 7, 2017, 31-year-old Iranian asylum seeker Hamed Shamshiripour was found dead in a forest near Manus Prison. His death was ruled a suicide, though many detainees suspected foul play. For over a year, Shamshiripour had suffered from severe mental health crises. Repeated pleas to Australian authorities for medical intervention were ignored. Instead of receiving treatment, he was imprisoned multiple times for displaying erratic behavior (Doherty, 2017 August 7th n.p). Boochani, writing in the *Huffington Post*, condemned the conditions that led to Shamshiripour's death: Hamed's case is another example of Australia trying to shift its problems to PNG. Instead of protecting refugees, Australia has abandoned them in Manus without the necessary support (Boochani, 2017 August 13th n.p).

His death emphasized Australia's deliberate neglect, proving that simply unlocking the prison doors was not a solution. The Manus system did not just imprison people, it destroyed them.

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Part four (second part of 2017: Oct-Dec): the siege, when the standoff becomes visible and the creative resistance echoes

Following years of escalating legal battles, international media scrutiny, and detainee-led resistance, the Manus crisis reached a breaking point in late 2017. The official closure of the detention center was framed by the Australian government as a resolution, but for the refugees, it marked the beginning of a final standoff. Australia sought to dismantle Manus without accountability, while the detainees, now more visible than ever, refused to disappear into new sites of containment. In April 2016, Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court ruled that the indefinite detention of asylum seekers on Manus was unconstitutional and ordered the facility's closure. In response, the Australian government announced it would shut down the center by October 31, 2017, yet refused to take responsibility for the detainees, instead pushing for their relocation to facilities in Lorengau town. As the deadline approached, more than 600 refugees staged a collective act of defiance, refusing to leave the camp and rejecting forced transfers. Their protest

was not just about physical safety (though the threats posed by local hostility were real) but also about asserting their dignity, refusing further dehumanization, and resisting a migration regime that had imprisoned them for years. The 2017 siege at Manus represented a moment when the detainees, once positioned as passive subjects of state control, seized the narrative and disrupted the power structures imposed upon them.

Through social media activism, journalism, and artistic resistance, the refugees amplified their struggle, forcing the Australian government's policies into the international spotlight. Behrouz Boochani played a central role in documenting and exposing the realities of the siege, ensuring that the world witnessed the systematic dismantling of the detention camp. His reporting, alongside broader acts of protest, transformed the Manus detainees into visible political actors and drew widespread global solidarity.

- For the Australian government, closing Manus was not just about shutting down a detention center but it was about reaffirming the deterrence doctrine that underpinned its entire border regime. The prolonged standoff threatened to expose the contradictions at the heart of offshore detention: that asylum seekers were never truly 'processed,' only warehoused and abandoned. To maintain control over the narrative, the government responded with escalating force, treating the siege as an act of defiance that needed to be crushed rather than a humanitarian crisis requiring resolution. More than 600 refugees refused to leave, citing the dangers awaiting them in Lorengau town (Doherty, 2017 October, 23rd). Many feared the same violence that had led to Reza Barati's murder in 2014. Aref, a former detainee, described the situation:

Actually, it was a small town. And the camp was in the center, among people. Fences were not reliable, too. All officers were local and if something like the riot in 2013 happened again, and someone was killed again, no one was there to protect us. All of us were scared of it. We knew if we went among those people, they were not reliable and

they would possibly attack us, and no one was there to protect us. We said we wouldn't go, and we wanted to stay (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, Georgia via Zoom).

Aref's words highlight the deep-seated fear among detainees, shaped by past violence and exacerbated by the lack of security in the new centers. But beyond safety concerns, the resistance embodied a more fundamental rejection of indefinite incarceration. Boochani, in an article for *The Guardian*, articulated the defiance:

We won't put up with being incarcerated anymore. We have no energy left to go from this prison to another prison. We haven't committed any crime, and we can't tolerate prison any longer (Boochani, 2017 November 13th n.p.).

For three weeks, refugees remained inside the center without food, electricity, or running water. To force them out, Australian and PNG authorities cut off supplies and singled out protest leaders for removal. On November 23, PNG's paramilitary Mobile Squad, police, and immigration officers stormed the camp, forcibly transferring refugees to the new locations (Davidson & Doherty, 2017, November 23). Boochani was among those arrested. In a tweet following his release, he wrote:

I've just been released. They han[d]cuffed me for more than two hours in a place behind the prison camp. The police commander yelled at me, "you are reporting against us." They pushed me several times and broke my belongings. Will write more about it later (Boochani, 2017, November 23).

Aref, recalling the final moments of the siege, recounted:

"They came and filled our wells with damp, punctured our water tanks which were filled by rain, destroyed our fireplaces, kicked our groceries, and scattered them. Then they told us: 'You have to leave here and go to the camps in the city center.' They were ready to kick us with wooden sticks. The minibuses were also ready. They told us to put away our stuff and go. We had to do it. We got on the minibus, and they took us to the new camps." (Interview, January 2021, Former Manus detainee, Atlanta, Georgia via Zoom)

- The violent dismantling of the camp was designed to break the detainees' resistance, but in many ways, it had the opposite effect. The Manus siege and the events surrounding the

detention center closure in late 2017 forced other actors such as human rights organizations, media, and the public to confront and critically reassess Australia's offshore detention policies. Global media outlets widely covered the standoff, framing it not just as a policy failure but as an indictment of Australia's human rights record. Advocacy groups intensified pressure on Australia, while UNHCR condemned the conditions in Lorengau. Within days of the forced removals, human rights organizations called for an independent investigation, and protests erupted in Australian cities in solidarity with the Manus detainees. While the Australian government continued to dismiss the crisis, it became increasingly clear that offshore detention was no longer a hidden or politically neutral policy; it was a visible scandal with international consequences.

Despite their forced transfer, the Manus refugees' resistance resonated globally. In November, Amnesty International recognized Boochani's work, further legitimizing the detainees' struggle as a human rights issue rather than just an immigration dispute. The UNHCR's December report reinforced this, calling for urgent policy shifts and placing renewed international pressure on Australia. While the government dismissed these findings, the combined impact of media attention, refugee-led advocacy, and institutional condemnation made it harder for Australia to maintain its facade of control.

In November, Boochani was awarded Amnesty International Australia's Media Award in the *print, online, and multimedia* category for his reporting in *The Guardian* and *The Saturday Paper* ([Guardian Staff, 2017 November 1st](#)). The recognition underscored how the struggle at Manus had gained legitimacy in international human rights circles.

Meanwhile, UNHCR released a report in December highlighting the deteriorating situation, confirming that "3,172 refugees and asylum-seekers have been forcibly transferred by

Australia to ‘offshore processing’ facilities in Papua New Guinea and Nauru since 2013” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017 December 15th p. 1). The report described worsening security conditions and growing hostility toward refugees in Lorengau, further validating the fears that had driven detainees to resist relocation.

As tensions escalated, Manus landowners launched their own protest, blocking access to refugee accommodations in December. Their grievances (rooted in Australia’s failure to properly compensate them for hosting the detention center) further restricted food and medical supplies. While the refugees were trapped between Australian policies and local hostility, this blockade highlighted how Manus itself had become a site of competing struggles over sovereignty, control, and responsibility (Tlozek, December 20th, 2017).

Boochani, reporting from Manus, warned of rising tensions:

The small villages do not have the capacity to accept 600 men. They have small populations and there is a real risk of conflict. It’s like a city with a population of 100,000 suddenly having to accept 100,000 foreign people. What will happen? (Boochani, 2017 December 9th).

- Boochani published *The Manus Resistance Manifesto* in *The Saturday Paper* (Boochani, 2017, December 9), using poetry and radical prose to challenge Australia’s offshore detention policies and reclaim the dignity of the imprisoned men. This piece became widely recognized as a powerful articulation of the Manus detainees’ struggle, blending journalistic urgency with literary resistance. Academics and journalists alike responded to *The Manus Resistance Manifesto* as a groundbreaking intervention in the discourse on forced migration, carceral politics, and human rights. Scholars in refugee studies and critical migration research highlighted the piece’s ability to disrupt dominant narratives of victimhood, instead framing detainees as active agents in their own resistance (Surma, 2018; Perera & Pugliese, 2020).

The events of 2017 marked a turning point in the Manus struggle. The first part of the year was shaped by legal battles, international diplomacy, and media interventions. Trump's heated exchange with Turnbull exposed the global stakes of the offshore complex. The Good Friday attack, the class action lawsuit, and the release of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* intensified scrutiny on Australia's detention policies. The second part of the year, however, saw resistance take on a new form centered on the physical refusal to be displaced. The Manus siege redefined the struggle, exposing the inherent contradictions of Australia's policy. Though forcibly relocated, the detainees' refusal to move willingly shattered the illusion of control that the Australian government sought to maintain. The movement was no longer just about offshore detention; it had become a broader symbol of state repression, resilience, and human dignity. In the aftermath of Manus' closure, refugees continued to fight for their rights through legal action, artistic expression, and media advocacy. Boochani's journalistic efforts ensured that their voices remained part of the global discourse. The siege may have ended in forced transfers, but the resistance it represented left a lasting imprint on the fight against border violence and the struggle for refugee justice.

Part 5: when creative resistance works

By 2018, creative resistance had achieved what years of legal battles and hunger strikes had struggled to sustain: a global shift in how Manus was understood. The publication of *No Friend but the Mountains*, the success of Manus on international stages, and the visceral imagery of *Remain* ensured that offshore detention could no longer be framed as a necessary evil. These works exposed the Australian government's tactics of erasure, replacing state narratives of security with firsthand accounts of suffering, resistance, and resilience. While they did not

immediately dismantle offshore detention, they forced Australia's policies into global consciousness, mobilizing new networks of solidarity and advocacy. Through literature, theatre, and visual art, Manus detainees had not only resisted dehumanization but had also reclaimed their own histories, ensuring that their struggle could no longer be dismissed or ignored. The international recognition of these creative interventions not only showed the potentials of arts in mobilizing global solidarity but also in influencing policy debates and reshaping the moral terrain of migration politics.

2018: Literature, Theatre, and Visual Art as Resistance

- In February, Manus, a play written and directed by Iranian playwright Nazanin Sahamizadeh, premiered in Tehran. Based on real-life testimonies of eight refugees detained on Manus and Nauru, the play used verbatim storytelling to expose the brutal realities of offshore detention. Behrouz Boochani's character played a leading role, and he collaborated extensively with Sahamizadeh, acting as the bridge between the production and the refugees whose stories were featured. The play later toured internationally, reaching audiences in Bangladesh, India, and Adelaide, demonstrating how refugee narratives could transcend geographical borders and cultural divides to challenge the legitimacy of Australia's offshore detention model (Sebag-Montefiore, 2019 March 9th).
- In May, yet another life was lost to Manus' system of indefinite detention. Salim Kyawning, a refugee incarcerated on the island, took his own life by jumping from a moving bus. His was the third suicide on Manus in less than a year and the seventh refugee death in total. Boochani, writing in The Guardian, described Kyawning's death not as an isolated tragedy but as an inevitable consequence of "organized tactics of violence" designed to wear

detainees down to the point of collapse (Boochani, 2018 May 25th). His critique went beyond individual failings in mental health care, instead arguing that the entire offshore detention system was deliberately structured to inflict psychological torment. Through his reporting, Boochani made it impossible for the Australian government to frame these deaths as unfortunate exceptions. He exposed them as political decisions, calculated acts of violence embedded in the state's migration policy.

- On July 31, 2018, Boochani's literary resistance reached its most significant milestone with the publication of *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*. The book, composed in Farsi and smuggled out of the camp via WhatsApp messages sent to collaborator Moones Mansoubi, was translated into English by Omid Tofighian. It became an instant sensation, topping bestseller lists at the Melbourne Writers Festival and receiving acclaim from *The Guardian*, *The Saturday Paper*, and *The Age* as one of the best books of the year (Readings, 2018 September 4th). *No Friend but the Mountains* challenged conventional classifications. The book was at once memoir, poetry, philosophy, and political indictment. By refusing to adopt a linear, conventional refugee narrative, Boochani created a work that dismantled the dehumanizing bureaucratic logic of offshore detention. It was not just a book about Manus; it was a book written from Manus, with every sentence bearing the weight of lived experience.

Recognition of Boochani's work extended beyond the literary world. In October, he was awarded the prestigious Anna Politkovskaya Award for Investigative Journalism. Named after the Russian journalist murdered for her truth-telling, the award honored Boochani's courage in documenting Australia's offshore detention regime (Zhou, 2018 October 5th). The award committee drew attention to the parallels between Europe's increasingly restrictive

migration policies and Australia's offshore model, warning that leaders across the world were looking to Manus as a blueprint for exclusionary border practices. By honoring Boochani, the committee implicitly condemned the Australian government's attempt to erase the suffering of detainees through secrecy and isolation.

- The year also saw new forms of artistic resistance emerge from Manus. In November, *Remain*, a video artwork directed by Iranian-Australian artist Hoda Afshar, premiered at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Shot on Manus with the collaboration of detainees, *Remain* explored the liminal space between captivity and freedom, using haunting imagery to capture the psychological toll of prolonged detention. Boochani served as both a central figure and an artistic collaborator in the project, reinforcing his role as a key creative voice in the resistance movement ([Clark, 2018 November 10-16](#)).

At the same time, legal battles against the offshore detention system continued. In December, *The Guardian* reported that multiple lawsuits had been filed against the Australian government and its contractors, alleging that security personnel and other staff had been placed in unsafe working conditions and that the Australian government had failed in its duty of care (Davey, 2018 December 27th). These lawsuits, while distinct from the detainees' direct resistance, further eroded the legitimacy of the offshore system, forcing the government to confront its legal and ethical liabilities.

Part Six: The Year of Acknowledgments and Disappointments

By 2019, the global visibility of Manus Island's detainees had reached an unprecedented level. Creative resistance had shattered Australia's attempts to suppress refugee voices, with Behrouz Boochani's literary triumph symbolizing the political power of storytelling. Yet, as Boochani's

work gained international recognition, Australia's offshore system remained intact, demonstrating the limits of artistic and legal interventions in dismantling systemic violence. The year encapsulated a stark paradox: while creative resistance forced the Manus crisis into mainstream consciousness, the machinery of border control persisted, with the repeal of Medevac, corruption scandals, and continued deaths revealing the endurance of state repression. The year 2019 was marked by two seemingly contradictory developments. On one hand, Behrouz Boochani and other former detainees received increased recognition, with Boochani's literary achievements bringing unprecedented attention to the offshore detention system. On the other hand, systemic injustices remained entrenched, culminating in the repeal of the Medevac legislation, the exposure of corruption within the detention industry, and ongoing deaths linked to Australia's migration policies. This period encapsulates the tension between individual success and structural failure. While creative resistance gained legitimacy and visibility, the offshore regime continued to inflict harm, demonstrating the limits of artistic and legal interventions in achieving systemic change.

2019: A Year of Paradox

- In January, Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* won Australia's richest literary award, the \$100,000 Victorian Prize for Literature, as well as the \$25,000 non-fiction prize at the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards (Wahlquist, 2019). The book's eligibility sparked debate, as entry guidelines required writers to be Australian citizens or permanent residents. However, the Wheeler Centre, which organized the awards, made an exception, recognizing the global significance of Boochani's work

([Ponniah, 2019 February 1st](#)). In his acceptance speech, Boochani articulated the transformative power of literature as a tool for resistance, dignity, and survival:

I have been in a cage for years, but throughout this time, my mind has always been producing words, and these words have taken me across borders. I truly believe words are more powerful than the fences of this place. [...] This award is a victory—not only for us, but for literature and art, and above all, it is a victory for humanity. A victory for human dignity. A victory against a system that has never recognized us as human beings. A victory against a system that has reduced us to numbers (Boochani, 2019 February 1st).

While Boochani's literary success proved that words could defy the mechanisms of silence, it also underscored a harsh reality: visibility alone does not dismantle systems of oppression.

His recognition amplified refugee voices but did not fundamentally change Australia's border policies, illustrating the tension between cultural acknowledgment and political inaction. On February 12, the Australian Parliament passed the Medevac legislation, requiring the government to transfer asylum seekers in need of urgent medical care from Manus Island and Nauru to Australia if two or more doctors deemed it necessary (Cornish, 2019 February 19th). The bill was a historic defeat for Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government. The first time in 90 years that a sitting government lost a vote on its own legislation ([Murphy and Karp, 2019 February 12th](#)). The passing of Medevac was widely celebrated by detainees and human rights advocates, with Boochani tweeting:

It's a historic moment for all of the refugees on Manus and Nauru. Many people are happy now because they will finally receive medical treatment. Great to see the Australian Parliament finally vote for humanity ([Boochani, 2019 February 12th](#)).

However, this moment of progress was short-lived. On December 4, the Australian Senate repealed Medevac, citing concerns about 'national security' ([Martin, 2019 December 4th](#)).

The repeal of Medevac was not merely a legislative rollback; it was a calculated political maneuver to restore full government control over offshore detention. Despite medical professionals, human rights organizations, and former detainees advocating for its

continuation, the government invoked ‘national security’ to justify renewed secrecy and neglect. The move signaled a deliberate shift back toward unaccountable border governance, where suffering remained an essential feature, not an unintended consequence. Since Medevac’s introduction, 192 people had been transferred for medical care, but many were detained in hotel-prisons rather than receiving proper treatment (Hall, 2021 January). Senator Nick McKim, a strong advocate for refugee rights, condemned the repeal as a “dark day”:

The Senate has just removed the only glimmer of humanity from Australia’s brutal offshore detention regime. Secrecy has allowed lives to be destroyed and now it continues. We will keep fighting for every single person still stranded on Nauru and Papua New Guinea (McKim, 2019 December 4th).

The repeal of Medevac underscored the persistence of cruelty as policy, reinforcing the systemic disregard for detainee well-being.

- Beyond the repeal of Medevac, 2019 also exposed deep-seated corruption within Australia’s offshore detention industry. In March, the Paladin Scandal erupted when Australia’s Department of Home Affairs was forced to launch an internal audit into a \$423 million contract awarded to the little-known Paladin Group for refugee services on Manus (Grigg, Murray & Shapiro, 2019 March 13th). The contract, issued without a competitive tender, raised questions about transparency and accountability, marking what some described as a “mega Australian scandal” (PNGi, 2019 February 18).

Further investigations revealed financial irregularities involving NKW Holdings, a company suspected of inflating invoices and overcharging the Australian government for refugee accommodation and services (Baker, 2019 March 14th). A Financial Review report found that Australia’s offshore detention costs had skyrocketed from \$350 per detainee per night in 2008 to \$1,600 per night in 2019. A fivefold increase (Tadros, Grigg, Murray, & Shapiro, 2019, June 18). The revelations exposed offshore detention not just as a site of suffering, but

as a multi-million-dollar industry where private security firms, government contractors, and political insiders profited from human misery. The financial exploitation of detainees reinforced what advocates had long warned: cruelty was not an accident of the system; it was its design.

- By September 2019, nearly all refugees remaining on Manus were transferred to Port Moresby, signaling the closure of the Manus detention system after six years ([Whiting, 2019 September 11th](#)). However, the closure of Manus was not a dismantling of offshore detention but a reconfiguration of it. The Australian government strategically shifted operations to Nauru, ensuring that while one prison shut down, the machinery of exclusion remained operational. For many former Manus detainees, this transition only reinforced the grim reality that indefinite detention was a policy without an expiration date. 53 men were detained without charges in Bomana Prison, cut off from outside communication. Boochani, now in Port Moresby, continued to expose these abuses, tweeting:

After 28 days, we still haven't heard anything from the people imprisoned by the PNG and Australian governments in Bomana Prison in Port Moresby. The scant information coming out suggests they are under extreme duress, being coerced to return to their countries ([Boochani, 2019 September 9th](#)).

- Meanwhile, the Australian government quietly shifted its focus to offshore detention on Nauru, ensuring that while Manus was dismantled, the underlying system remained intact. In November, after years of forced exile, Behrouz Boochani left Papua New Guinea to attend the Word Christchurch literary festival in New Zealand on a one-month visa. Upon arrival, he declared that he would never return to PNG or Australia's offshore detention regime (Doherty, 2019). By granting him entry, New Zealand positioned itself in contrast to Australia's hardline stance, signaling a moral and political rejection of offshore detention.

This marked the beginning of a new phase in his life where he was no longer writing from within the system but as a free man.

By the end of 2019, Australia's offshore regime faced growing pressure. With Manus shuttered, mounting legal cases against detention contractors, and public scrutiny intensifying, the once-invincible deterrence policy appeared increasingly fragile. 2019 revealed a fundamental paradox: resistance can amplify voices, but without structural change, visibility alone cannot dismantle oppression. Boochani's success symbolized the power of creativity and networking, yet the repeal of Medevac, the corruption scandals, and the ongoing incarceration of refugees in Bomana made clear that state violence was not yet over. As Australia entered a new decade, the question remained: could creative resistance translate into material change, or would the offshore detention regime simply evolve into new forms of control?.

Part 7: fleeing the exile

The final years of offshore detention regime in Manus marked both a personal victory for Behrouz Boochani and a sobering reminder of the endurance of Australia's offshore detention policies. Boochani's relocation to New Zealand marked a rare victory against Australia's offshore regime, proving that creative resistance could break through state-imposed exile. Yet, his journey also underscored the deep contradictions of Australia's migration policies: while individual visibility could secure freedom for one, it could not dismantle a system designed to erase many. The offshore detention model did not collapse; it merely adapted, finding new sites of incarceration within Australia's borders and beyond. The closure of the Manus and Nauru detention centers did not signal the end of Australia's deterrence policies but rather their reshaping. As the government continued to detain refugees offshore and within Australia's

borders, the persistence of these policies, despite widespread legal, political, and humanitarian critiques, demonstrated the difficulty of translating acts of resistance into systemic transformation. However, Boochani's journey also provided a blueprint for leveraging creative subjectivation as a tool for advocacy and reform. His escape from Manus, the global recognition of his work, and his eventual resettlement in New Zealand revealed how artistic resistance can challenge dominant state narratives, shift public discourse, and offer an alternative vision of justice and dignity for refugees.

2020: Between Recognition and Injustice

- As Australia's offshore detention regime entered its next phase, hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees remained in limbo, held in Papua New Guinea, Nauru, and onshore detention facilities in Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their vulnerability, as many were confined to overcrowded conditions with limited access to adequate healthcare. The pandemic did not lead to a reassessment of Australia's detention policies but exposed their injustice more starkly. With Manus dismantled, the government rebranded its punitive border regime, moving detainees into hotel prisons and onshore detention centers. As Manus and Nauru were shut down, hotel prisons and community detention sites emerged as their modern replacements, reinforcing the same logic of control while stripping detainees of legal protections and public visibility. Rather than dismantling offshore detention, the Australian government simply relocated its punitive border policies, ensuring that incarceration remained central to its asylum regime ([Henriques-Gomes, 2020, May 12th](#)). Despite restrictions on public gatherings during the pandemic, protests erupted across Australia demanding the release of refugees and asylum seekers. Activists and human rights

organizations emphasized that detaining individuals in unsafe conditions during a global health crisis not only violated international law but also put detained refugees at significant risk. These demonstrations highlighted the continued struggle against indefinite detention, reinforcing the notion that while the Manus regime had ended, its logic remained deeply embedded in Australian migration policy.

- On July 23, 2020, on his birthday and the seventh anniversary of his arrival at Christmas Island, Behrouz Boochani was formally granted refugee status in New Zealand. This recognition marked the end of his more than six-year exile under Australia's offshore detention system. Reflecting on his journey, he tweeted:

I salute the people of New Zealand for rejecting the politics of hate & division. Australia's asylum policies are harmful to both refugees & people of Australia, many of whom are ashamed of their government's mistreatment of refugees & the stain left on their history (Boochani, 2020 July 23rd).

- A day after receiving refugee status, Boochani was appointed as a Senior Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, further solidifying his role as a scholar, journalist, and advocate for refugee rights. Boochani's transition from detainee to academic/writer/advocate was more than a personal achievement; it served as a direct challenge to Australia's asylum policies. His recognition as a refugee in New Zealand underscored the possibility of an alternative approach that valued dignity and human rights over indefinite detention. His presence outside the confines of offshore incarceration disrupted the Australian government's narrative that deterrence was the only viable response to forced migration, presenting instead that recognition and inclusion offer a more just and sustainable path forward.

Boochani's relocation to New Zealand closed a personal chapter of exile but left open pressing questions about the future of Australia's migration policies. While Manus was dismantled, the offshore detention system did not disappear. It merely evolved into new forms of incarceration. The government continued to hold refugees offshore in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, as well as in onshore hotel-detention centers in Australia. Boochani's journey is a testament to the power of creative activism, but his escape did not bring down the system. Australia's offshore detention regime remains firmly in place, adapting rather than disappearing. His freedom is not the conclusion of this struggle but a call to keep resisting, until no one is left behind in exile

Part 8: The end of Manus, but not the end of offshore policy

The years following the closure of Manus Island's detention center did not mark the end of Australia's offshore detention regime but rather its strategic adaptation. As Papua New Guinea formally withdrew from its partnership with Australia at the end of 2021, Nauru became the sole remaining site for offshore processing. This shift did not reflect a humanitarian reorientation but rather a reassertion of Australia's commitment to deterrence-driven asylum policies. Even as the number of asylum seekers in offshore detention dwindled, the government continued investing millions in maintaining a largely empty detention infrastructure. Policy changes—including the long-delayed resettlement deal with New Zealand and the eventual relocation of the last refugee from Nauru—indicated a shift in strategy but not in intent. The legal and political architecture of offshore detention remained firmly intact, demonstrating the resilience of exclusionary migration policies and the state's determination to keep asylum seekers in limbo.

2021: The Reinforcement of Offshore Processing

- In September 2021, the Australian and Nauruan governments signed a new agreement to establish what they described as "an enduring" offshore processing arrangement (Doherty, 2021). While the agreement confirmed Nauru as the sole location for offshore detention, it also exposed the financial excesses of Australia's deterrence regime. Despite no new asylum seekers being transferred to Nauru since 2014, reports revealed that the cost of detaining a single refugee on Nauru had surged to \$350,000 per month, \$4.3 million per person annually (Doherty & Evershed, 2021 November 6th). This tenfold increase since 2016 raised serious concerns over the government's lack of transparency, with nearly \$400 million in offshore processing funds remaining unaccounted for. These revelations painted a stark picture: offshore detention had become less about security or asylum policy and more about sustaining an ideological and financial black hole.
- By October 2021, Australia officially announced the end of offshore processing in Papua New Guinea. The withdrawal was long overdue, especially after PNG's Supreme Court had ruled Manus' detention unconstitutional in 2016. At the time of the announcement, 124 refugees and asylum seekers remained in PNG, most living in Port Moresby (Doherty, 2021 October 6th). Eighty-eight had already been granted refugee status, yet they were left with only limited and ambiguous options: transfer to Nauru, remain in PNG with a vague promise of "pathways to citizenship", or wait for potential resettlement through the U.S. refugee swap deal (Doherty, 2021 October 6th). Rather than accepting responsibility for those it had exiled, Australia abandoned them once again, leaving them trapped in yet another layer of bureaucratic limbo.

2022: The Long-Delayed New Zealand Resettlement Deal

- In March 2022, after nearly a decade of refusal, Australia finally accepted New Zealand's longstanding offer to take in refugees held in offshore detention. Under this agreement, New Zealand committed to resettling up to 150 refugees annually for three years (ABC News, 2013 February 8th). However, this deal explicitly excluded the 105 refugees still in Papua New Guinea, forcing them to seek alternative pathways through separate UNHCR arrangements. The agreement had originally been signed in 2013 between Prime Ministers Julia Gillard and John Key, yet for years, Australian leaders (particularly under the Coalition government) had rejected its implementation, claiming New Zealand could become a 'backdoor' for refugees to eventually reach Australia (Doherty, 2022 March 25th).
- By April 2022, in the lead-up to the federal election, the Australian government granted temporary visas to all refugees transferred from offshore detention under the Medevac pathway, releasing them from indefinite detention after nearly a decade (Australian Associated Press, 2022 April 7th). While this move was a step forward, it did not resolve the larger issue of permanent protection, as the Labor government continued to uphold the use of temporary visas, keeping many refugees in a state of uncertainty and without a clear future in Australia.

2023: The Closure of Nauru, But Not the Policy

- On June 24, 2023, the Australian government moved the last refugee from its offshore detention center on Nauru to Brisbane, seemingly bringing an end to the second phase of offshore processing that had lasted 11 years (Doherty & Gillespie, 25 Jun 2023). Yet, despite this symbolic closure, Australia kept the detention infrastructure on Nauru, allowing the center to be reactivated at any time. This move reflected a broader pattern of policy

adaptation rather than abolition, ensuring that the offshore processing regime could continue whenever politically convenient.

- By this point, Australia had the highest average immigration detention period in the world, with asylum seekers held for an average of 689 days (twelve times longer than in the United States (Knaus and Doherty, 2022 February 16th). The election of the Labor Party in April 2022, after nine years of Coalition rule, did not bring a fundamental shift in refugee policy. Mandatory and indefinite detention continued, the punitive Nauru pathway remained in place, and a permanent ban on resettlement for refugees arriving by boat was still enforced. While the government ended offshore processing in PNG and reduced the number of people detained offshore, it failed to dismantle the system itself, leaving hundreds of people trapped in legal and bureaucratic limbo.

The years 2021–2023 did not mark the end of offshore detention but rather its reconfiguration. With Papua New Guinea formally withdrawing from the arrangement, Nauru temporarily emptied, and New Zealand finally accepting refugees, offshore processing seemed to be scaling down. However, the legal framework and infrastructure remained intact, ensuring that the policy could be revived at any time. The financial excesses of the system (with millions spent on detaining fewer and fewer refugees) exposed offshore detention as increasingly unsustainable, both economically and morally. However, despite these growing legal, humanitarian, and financial pressures, Australia's border policies remained fundamentally unchanged. The government rebranded rather than abolished offshore detention, maintaining a network of invisible borders and legal exclusions that continued to shape the lives of asylum seekers. Australia's offshore regime did not end with the closure of Manus or Nauru. Instead, it evolved, sustaining an exclusionary system designed to render refugees invisible and unwanted, even as

creative resistance and legal challenges continued to expose its moral and political contradictions.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the evolution of Australia's offshore detention regime on Manus Island, exposing it as both a tool of punitive governance and a site of creative resistance. Through a chronological and thematic analysis of key events, it has demonstrated how the Australian state weaponized bureaucracy, legal ambiguity, and indefinite incarceration to dismantle the political agency of asylum seekers. Yet, against these immense structural constraints, detainees (most notably Behrouz Boochani) reclaimed their narratives, resisting both their physical confinement and the state's efforts to render them invisible.

The concept of creative subjectivation, explored throughout this dissertation, has provided a lens to understanding how those trapped within carceral spaces can transform themselves from detainees into political agents. On Manus, resistance took many forms: from hunger strikes and legal battles to literature, film, and digital activism. These acts of defiance not only disrupted the detention system from within but also forced offshore detention into the global spotlight. *No Friend but the Mountains*, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, and Boochani's relentless journalism redefined what resistance could look like under conditions of extreme surveillance and state repression.

Yet, while creative resistance fractured the government's carefully constructed migration regime and narratives, it did not dismantle the system itself. The closure of Manus in 2019 did not mark the end of offshore detention but rather its strategic reconfiguration. As this chapter has shown, Australia's deterrence policies persisted, shifting to new forms of incarceration, from

hotel prisons to onshore detention centers. The state adapted, ensuring that while Manus was abandoned, the machinery of exclusion remained intact. The simultaneous rise of creative resistance and the endurance of border violence poses a critical question: Can visibility alone bring about systemic change?

Boochani's journey illustrates both the power and the limits of creative subjectivation. His literary and journalistic achievements forced a global reckoning with Australia's offshore system, yet they did not prevent the detention of thousands who came after him. His relocation to New Zealand in 2019 was a personal triumph, but it also underscored a painful reality: one voice, no matter how powerful, cannot alone dismantle an entire system designed to dehumanize and exclude. This is the enduring challenge of asylum politics, not just in Australia, but globally. Manus Prison serves as a stark case study of how border regimes function in the contemporary world. As explored in Chapter 3, the death of asylum is not just an Australian phenomenon but part of a broader pattern in migration governance across the Global North. The policies enacted on Manus reflect a growing trend: the externalization of asylum, where protection is systematically denied, and deterrence is prioritized over human rights. The insights from this chapter about how detainees resist, how states adapt, and how global advocacy operates carry implications far beyond the Pacific and can extend to any other states in the Global North.

This chapter has also raised another crucial question: Why does creative resistance succeed in some contexts while remaining silenced in others? Not all refugee struggles receive the level of international attention that Manus did. The following chapters will examine the networks, platforms, and social capital that enabled Boochani and others to amplify their resistance, exploring the conditions under which creative subjectivation can lead to broader policy shifts. The fight against border violence does not end with the closure of a detention

center. Manus is gone, but its legacy endures in the lives of those who survived it, in the policies that continue to exile and incarcerate, and in the creative movements that refuse to be silenced. This chapter has sought not just to document this history but to highlight the urgency of the ongoing struggle. The lesson of Manus is clear: resistance must persist, until no one is left behind in exile.

Chapter 5

Behrouz Boochani and the liberating Buddha: a documentary film chapter

<https://youtu.be/WOOx3VZZ6Ek>

Chapter 6:
Film Analysis

Introduction: Creative Methodologies for Voices Beyond Borders

This chapter examines the documentary film *Behrouz Boochani and the Liberating Buddha* as a creative exploration of how Behrouz Boochani, a once-silenced asylum seeker under Australia's offshore detention regime, reclaimed his political subjectivity through creative resistance. By documenting Boochani's creative endeavors, the film highlights the potentials of art and creativity in amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dehumanizing and marginalizing systems. Rooted in the framework of 'creative subjectivation,' the documentary portrays Boochani's creative resistance, showing how artistic expression serves as a means of disidentification, a demand for democratic values, and a reconfiguration of marginalized identities. (Muñoz, 1999; Rancière, 2004).

When I first conceived this project, I envisioned a research process involving direct engagement with multiple participants across Manus Island, supported by ethnographic fieldwork and in-person interviews conducted on-site. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 and its resulting travel restrictions necessitated significant methodological adjustments. These unforeseen circumstances necessitated a shift from multiple case studies to an in-depth exploration of Behrouz Boochani's creative activism. This shift was both practical and conceptual. Boochani's unique role as a journalist, writer, filmmaker, and advocate offered a lens to examine broader themes of refugee resistance and resilience while addressing the ethical and logistical challenges of remote research.

The process of producing the documentary brought with it a range of methodological and ethical tensions. Although Boochani actively participated in the project from the selection of participants to the final stages, including the choice of footage for the final version, he raised concerns about a few scenes after I presented him with the initial draft. For instance, in one

scene, Persian music was playing in the background, which he felt was unsuitable. He preferred Kurdish music instead, so I replaced it accordingly. In another case, a person's name was mentioned in the film, which made him uncomfortable, so I removed it. However, there were also instances where Boochani initially disagreed with the inclusion of a particular scene. For example, a scene in the kitchen of his second home in Christchurch was contentious, but after discussing it together, I convinced him to keep it in the final version. These discussions and adjustments were made possible by the long-standing rapport and trust I had built with Boochani over time.

One of the most significant challenges was navigating the balance between artistic representation and academic rigor. The participatory nature of the project required reflexivity and collaboration at every stage, particularly in representing Boochani's story without overshadowing the collective experiences of other detainees. As Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) warn, focusing too heavily on a single figure can risk reinforcing hierarchies of visibility within marginalized communities. To address this, I framed Boochani's narrative as both unique and representative, situating his experiences within the larger tapestry of refugee resistance.

The documentary also posed technical and emotional challenges. Establishing trust with Boochani was essential, and this trust was built gradually through ongoing dialogue and collaboration. I strategically delayed formal filming until mutual trust was firmly established, allowing for more natural and meaningful interactions to unfold. This approach demanded flexibility, requiring me to adapt both my role as a researcher and the methodological tools I used. By prioritizing moments of genuine interaction over staged interviews, I sought to create an authentic portrayal of Boochani's experiences, capturing the subtleties of his personality and the complexities of his journey.

In addition to the interpersonal dynamics, the editing process posed another set of challenges. The film's narrative structure (interweaving interviews, scenes from Boochani's daily life, and fictionalized reenactments) required careful attention to coherence and thematic resonance. Visual storytelling techniques, such as contrasting motion and static shots, were employed to emphasize Boochani's dynamic presence while maintaining an awareness of the broader systemic issues at play. For instance, scenes depicting Boochani's life in New Zealand highlight the enduring impact of his detention experience while also portraying him as a multifaceted individual, not solely defined by his status as a former refugee.

Ultimately, this chapter unpacks the methodological journey and ethical considerations involved in creating the documentary, providing insights into the processes and tensions that shaped its production. By situating Boochani's story within a framework of creative resistance, the film not only challenges dominant narratives surrounding refugees but also invites critical reflection on the transformative potential of art as a tool for advocacy and solidarity. This analysis reveals how the documentary's aesthetic and political dimensions engage with broader questions of visibility, representation, and justice in the context of Australia's offshore detention regime.

How to analyse the documentary film?

Analyzing a film can be approached through a variety of methods and perspectives. The documentary film produced from this project can be seen as an independent piece of art, self-referential and self-contained, forming a complete aesthetic object in its own right (Ransom, 1948). Indeed, numerous contemporary film scholars and philosophers have acknowledged the status of film as an art form (Gaut, 2002, p. 310). For example, David Bordwell and Kristin

Thompson (2001), in their influential work 'Film Art: An Introduction', argue that the convergence of visual, auditory, and narrative elements in film establishes it as a complex and impactful mode of artistic expression. Additionally, Laura Mulvey (2013), through her highly cited essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', delves into the intricate interplay between cinematography, narrative construction, and thematic exploration, positioning film within the realm of high art and a visual medium which is not merely entertainment but a cultural artifact that reflects and influences societal norms and power structures. These scholarly contributions, along with numerous others, collectively reinforce the contemporary understanding of film as a rich and multifaceted art form, deserving of serious academic consideration. Although the artistic aspects of filmmaking were indispensable to me in this project, incorporating the research participants and especially the key participant (Behrouz Boochani) into the collaborative process of filmmaking, redistributes authorship from the director and situates it within a space that encompasses researchers, participants, the research questions, and the medium itself. While this may appear to diverge from the path of recognizing film as a purely artistic expression as described by Gaut (2010), I consider it an essential step toward acknowledging film as an integral component of visual methodologies and as a legitimate form of research. In this context, the creation of film within visual methodologies serves to facilitate the research inquiry, with filmmaking serving to acquire knowledge rather than an end.

Moreover, since the aesthetic value of an artwork is exclusively realized through the experience of engaging with it, and as perception of an artwork is both contextual and dependent on the environment in which it is experienced, it is inherently subjective (Goldman, 2006). This subjectivity implies that different observers may perceive the same artwork differently. Consequently, guiding the audience's experience by unpacking what to concentrate on and how

to interact an artwork can significantly enhance their engagement with the artwork ([Diffey, 2003](#); [Goldman, 1995](#)). To focus my discussion, I analyzed *Behrouz Boochani and the Liberating Buddha* (Mostolizadeh, 2023) through the conceptual framework of ‘creative subjectivation’ developed in this study. Within this chapter, I unpack how the film's aesthetics and contents actively engage with and contribute to the understanding of creative subjectivation. For this purpose, I have identified a series of themes in the film that correlate with the three distinctive modes of creative subjectivation: disidentification, democratic principles, and reconfiguration, delving into the representation of each within the context of the film. Additionally, to show the connection between the thematic representation and the film’s narrative, I also engaged in an analysis of the film’s narrative when helpful. In this view, film is a compilation of narratives that render the film intelligible to viewers. Bordwell unpacked the film’s narrative not as a direct message that one should decode. Instead, he views narrative as a form of representation that invites viewers to make inferences and engage in deeper interpretation (Bordwell, 2008). Film narratives extend beyond mere depictions of time and place, offering a structured experience that weaves together spatial, temporal, and causal perceptions ([Branigan 1992, 74](#)). This multifaceted approach to film analysis, integrating thematic exploration with narrative examination, allows for a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the documentary.

The layers of narrative

The documentary film made for this dissertation is structured in three layers. The first layer consists of parts from interviews I conducted with 12 participants of this project. I coordinated with Boochani to select participants for this project. The individuals who were selected are those Boochani has been in contact with for a prolonged period—ranging from three to eight years—

and with whom he had maintained professional or personal relationships. Concurrently, these individuals could be identified as those who have played roles in the advocacy network for Manus or have contributed to the network's expansion. In the introduction, I discussed some details about the participants and their connections with Boochani and certain methodological aspects regarding this layer.

In the second layer, the film shows glimpses of Boochani's daily life in New Zealand after he gained his freedom. In this layer, two of Boochani's relocations are depicted; one within Christchurch (a city in the South Island of New Zealand) from one house to another, and the other from Christchurch to Wellington, the country's capital in the North Island. The discussion about a sense of belonging and home with Boochani provided some insights into Boochani's ideas (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [10:13](#)), revealing his reflections and perspectives on identity, migration, and his sense of belonging to his surroundings. This conversation shed light on the multifaceted experiences of refugees reconciling their disrupted sense of belonging while navigating new environments. Additionally, in this layer of the film, snippets of his human interests and hobbies are portrayed through conversations or inserted clips. In these scenes, Boochani is portrayed not merely as a former refugee, but as a multifaceted human being who, like anyone else, experiences love (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [1:12:01](#)), enjoys playing or watching soccer (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [33:04](#)), takes pleasure in smoking cigarettes (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [32:20](#)) and riding a bicycle (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [35:30](#)), and savors the joy of eating an ice cream or a slice of watermelon (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [32:14](#)). In this layer of the film, inspired by my observations of Boochani's everyday life, I deliberately avoided centering exclusively on his identity as a former refugee or overly emphasizing the traumas of his detention period. My aim

here, instead, was to portray a multifaceted character, diverging from the prevalent and one-dimensional images of refugees.

The third layer is composed of the footage filmed with an actress. In the interviews I conducted with Boochani, portions of which are integrated into the final version of the film, he mentioned a long-distance relationship he maintained during his detention in Papua New Guinea (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [1:12:00](#)). He detailed how a female partner helped him navigate the harsh realities of Manus and preserve his sense of self-worth within a male-dominant environment. Boochani has referred to this partner as ‘Buddha’ (a pseudonym), describing her as a source of inspiration and creativity: The tenderness that exists in love—do you know how much it can help in prison? The beauty that is created—do you know how much it can help you there? (Mostolizadeh, 2022, [1:12:00](#)). Like art and literature, love served as a sustaining and creative force, aiding Boochani's survival during his incarceration and the preservation of his physical and mental health. Love, paralleling art, remains a crucial element in Boochani's emancipation from the identity ascribed to him by the offshore regime. The footage taken with the actress enhances our understanding of the film's other layers. The film portrays an expectation of reunion between the female character and Boochani, illustrating the events unfolded in the first and second layers of the film more clearly. While Boochani, through his works, holds up a mirror to Australian society to acquaint them with the institutionalized violence inherent in their governance structures, love has become a mirror for Boochani to attain the tenderness of the soul and preserve his dignity.

Beyond Fences: Navigating Narrative of Liberation in the introductory and concluding sequences

The film begins with the sound of the sea in the darkness. Alongside the sound of music, the camera moves towards a lighthouse on the sea trapped within fences. A girl in a wine-colored dress is staring at the lighthouse behind the fences, her hands clasped on the fences, suggesting a desire to pass through. She cannot get any closer to the magnificent lighthouse. However, the camera passes through the border of fences (Mostolizadeh, 2023 00:14)

This movement takes us to the next sequence. Here, Bahrooz Boochani is seen in a close-up shot, wearing a white dress the same as the colour of the lighthouse, his hair disheveled in the wind, staring at a point in the distance. As the camera zooms back, we realize that we saw Boochani in a mirror, and the point he is looking at is somewhere at the sea (Mostolizadeh, 2023 00:38).

The camera, with an aerial pass over the sea, takes the perspective of Boochani and us as spectators to a point in the sea where a small island is besieged by the sea waves (Mostolizadeh, 2023 01:24), an island exactly like Manus. Just like the lighthouse that casts guiding light for sea travelers even from behind fences, Boochani too has become a source of inspiration during, and after, his detention, despite the oppressive system in place designed to subjugate him and his fellow detained asylum seekers. Using visual elements relevant in the context of the film (sea, lighthouse, fences, island), the introductory sequences set the stage for the audience to follow the story of someone whose voice has passed beyond the confinements, reaching the world, and echoing the unheard visas of detained asylum seekers within a cruel system of migration control.

In the final sequence, we return to the sea, to the point where the film began. The camera is moving back slowly from the island featured in the opening sequences. In this scene, we, the

audience, find ourselves reflected in the mirror where we first saw Boochani. The mirror is facing us now, raising questions about our reactions to oppressive regimes (Mostolizadeh, 2023 1:14:29). A crocheted shawl, a remnant from the lover character in the film, is left by the sea, close to the mirror, symbolizing the transient and elusive nature of the beloved who is portrayed abstractly throughout the film. Love is a creative force with an aesthetic like art and literature; it has the power to alter the distribution of the sensible, has transcendent qualities, provides a medium for self-expression and understanding, subvert established conventions, and have transformative potentials.

Having listened to profound discussions from the contributors about Boochani's resistance, discourse, and aesthetics, we are left pondering our takeaways and how they affect our perceptions and understandings. This is the point where the three layers of the film converge. Despite the answers that the film provides us through the key participant, Boochani, and other audio-visual devices about the power of art and creativity against authoritarian regimes like Manus, this transformative power is actualized and gains meaning through the impact it leaves on the viewers and their takeaways. In this chapter, I do not delve into the formal unpacking of the film in detail, as I did here for the introductory and concluding sections due to the space restraints of this dissertation. But instead, I briefly highlight several other stylistic approaches I incorporated in the film to shape a 'distribution of the sensible,' that guarantee visibility and audibility of Boochani.

For instance, I conducted an interview with Boochani inside a moving vehicle, while all the other interviews were carried out on online platforms in static environments. This was a deliberate aspect of my design for the film, influenced by Boochani's life. I find Boochani as someone who is perpetually restless, constantly creating, moving, and in motion. By highlighting

him on the move, I indeed illuminated one aspect of his personality using the visual capabilities at my disposal as the director. I portrayed all other interviewees in static shots during their interviews, while primarily presenting Boochani in motion. This technique of using motion to reflect aspects of a character is common in documentary filmmaking. For example, in the ‘Act of Killing’ by Joshua Oppenheimer (2012), the camera often follows the former Indonesian death squad leaders in motion, reflecting the ongoing unrest and unresolved trauma of their past actions. The camera in the case Oppenheimer’s work (2012) visually emphasizes the confused state of mind of the main subject. The use of motion as a visual metaphor in documentaries (Nichols, 2001) can be sought for several purposes. It can symbolize the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the subject’s life, underscore their restlessness, or highlight the ongoing nature of their journey, both literally and figuratively. In Boochani's case, representing him in motion underscores his continual state of exile and creativity, emphasizing his inability to remain static both physically and mentally. By contrasting Boochani’s moving shots with the static shots of other interviewees, I aimed to visually represent the differences in their experiences and states of being. While the static shots convey stability, reflection, and a sense of settled identity, the moving shots of Boochani highlight his ongoing journey, his active engagement with the world, and his continuous quest for freedom and expression. This juxtaposition not only adds depth to Boochani’s portrayal but also enriches the overall narrative of the film.

Another strategy I implemented in the film to emphasize my focus on Boochani was rendering all interview footage with contributors—excluding Boochani—in black and white. Additionally, I minimized the frame size in these interviews. These formal modifications were designed to underscore Boochani’s prominence and distinguish his role and presence in the film. Using different visual styles is also a common cinematic technique used by notable documentary

filmmakers to convey specific thematic elements or highlight certain individuals. For example, in Errol Morris's documentary film 'The Fog of War' he employed distinct visual styles to emphasize key interview subjects and their narratives. Morris (2003) used tightly framed, direct-to-camera close-ups of his interview subjects. This style creates an intimate and confrontational atmosphere, compelling viewers to focus closely on the subjects' facial expressions and emotions, enhancing the sense of intimacy and engagement with the narrative (Morris, 2003). In addition, the director designed a minimalist set, often using stark lighting to highlight the subjects against a plain background. This simplicity ensures that the focus remains on the subjects themselves, enhancing the directness and clarity of their narratives (Morris, 2003).

By using the distinct visual strategies for Boochani, I aimed to create a stark contrast between Boochani and other contributors, underscoring his perspective and creativity. The use of color and frame size as narrative devices can be linked to the broader tradition of visual storytelling in documentaries, where directors manipulate visual elements to convey deeper meanings and emotional undercurrents (Nichols, 2001). This technique not only draws the audience's attention to Boochani but also visually represents his centrality and dynamic presence in the film (Renov, 2004).

Analyzing the film through 'creative subjectivation'

Disidentification

Analyzing the documentary film based on the framework of 'creative subjectivation' clarifies key major themes embedded in the narrative of the film. Firstly, disidentification can explain the parts in the film that address Boochani's underlying understanding of resistance (see the quote

below from the film), particularly his drive to disidentify with oppressive structures and normative narratives:

It really took some time for me to raise the question that why they were calling you by numbers, and how terrible it is. I mean, I knew it is not good to name people with numbers from day one, but I did not have the vision to analyze this system (Mostolizadeh, 2023 30:36).

Disidentification, as practices that minoritarian subjects employ to survive and subvert marginalizing spaces from within (Muñoz, 1999), can be identified in the film when depicting Boochani's endeavor to create spaces of autonomy on Manus. Arnold Zabel highlights in the film that, from the early days of his imprisonment on Manus, Boochani actively resisted being reduced to a mere number in the bureaucratic system, striving instead to assert his identity as an author:

Behrouz wanted to make contact with writers. He wanted to be known as a writer. Not necessarily, he didn't want to be MEG-45 of course as he was. And he did not want to be constantly called a refugee. He wanted immediately to say, more than that, you know, I ... I'm a voice, I'm a witness and I've got a way in which to bear witness, which is really powerful (Mostolizadeh, 2023 27:52).

As the narrative of my participants in the film revealed Boochani has been constantly refusing to be reduced to a mere number like MEG45 (his identification number on Manus), or a fixed identity like asylum seeker or a plaything in the hands of the offshore detention regime. The use of administrative language to describe the offshore detention elements serves to hide and trivialize the violence that occurs within its walls (McNevin, 2022). For example, the offshore facilities for exiling refugees were officially called Manus Island Regional Processing Center. However, Boochani has always called these facilities prison in our interviews and avoided using the language that normalizes and neutralizes the violent nature of these centres.

There is a duffle bag in the film that Boochani brought with him from Manus. In the film, he mentions that he traveled from PNG to New Zealand carrying this particular duffle bag (Mostolizadeh, 2023 17:13). In both of Boochani's relocations depicted in the film, this duffle bag can be seen, recognizable by the ID number imprinted on it (Mostolizadeh, 2023 1:04:11). By incorporating these scenes into the film and the duffle bag, which is a tangible representation of Boochani's journey, my aim was to show that while the impacts of his time in Manus remain in Boochani's life, he has not remained stagnant in this assigned identity defined for him in Manus. Instead, through initiating creative forms resistance, Boochani has continuously redefined himself and carved out new spaces of visibility for himself and his fellow refugees.

I discussed in the previous chapters that rendering asylum seekers invisible and stripping refugees of politicality are central to the functioning of offshore detention regimes (Mountz, 2020). To hide refugees, and to put them in remote islands are indeed at the heart of offshore regime of governance for refugees on Manus or other similar 'isolating islands.' Hoda Afshar has highlighted this Rancièrian conceptualization in the film: politics as Jacques Rancière says: "It's the struggle for visibility, it is an aesthetic... politics is the struggle of those whose voices had been inaudible, invisible. And they just want to fight for being seen (Mostolizadeh, 2023 27:05). Afshar also unpacked the damaging representations of asylum seekers by Australian mainstream media as 'desperate mass crowd' without individuality; a representation that had created a distorted image in the eyes of the Australian public:

The government would send reporters to Manus and Nauru selectively, but they would only cover the issue the way government desired and return. Refugees were depicted as a mass crowd from afar whose individuality was not seen. And this has created a discussion, don't they want safety? Didn't they escape from war and bombs? Now, they are safe on that island! What more do they want? Why? Because for that group of desperate people, nothing has been defined except rescuing from death. Because you never see or hear the individual stories of these people (Mostolizadeh, 2023 19:40).

The counterpolitics that Afshar and some other contributors suggested against this 'politics of invisibility' is using creativity and impactful forms of art which has the power to change the public opinion and attain visibility for marginalized groups. Powerful tools such as photography, film or literature equip asylum seekers with the tools to “stand against the same system which has taken the right of being seen or heard from them” (Mostolizadeh, 2023 26:55). Self-expression through art, writing, and similar mediums as Moones Mansoubi, another participant in the film shows help people “reclaim their identity and just show they are human, they exist” (Mostolizadeh, 2023 29:41). As Mansoubi mentioned, these creative tools are forms of “fighting back peacefully” against systems ‘stole’ people’s identity and ‘mute’ voices of asylum intentionally (Mostolizadeh, 2023 29:41). The film's narrative, by emphasizing the perspectives of its participants, resonates with Rancière's notion of an aesthetic of politics that confronts invisibility. By spotlighting Boochani's creative resistance, the film demonstrates how one can challenge prevailing perceptual and interpretive structures. It fosters new ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world, aligning with the goals articulated by Rancière (2004).

Journalism played a key role in Boochani’s disidentification. He had left Iran as a journalist under threat, and in the oppressive conditions of Manus Prison, his profession became more essential than ever. As a working journalist on the invisible ground that is in desperate need of enlightenment, Boochani's work was vital in exposing the injustices of the system and making rupture into its secrecy. However, Boochani realized that a convenient style of journalism cannot show the realities of offshore detention. He highlighted this in the film, “many journalists published many articles about Manus Island and Nauru but still people of Australia and people who follow this story couldn't understand how life is inside a prison camp, or how it works, because they couldn't understand this tragedy.” Boochani, as he himself mentioned in the film,

has adopted a poetic style even in writing his political articles. A style that is not objective and does not consider its sole duty to present facts about the subject. In describing Boochani's journalistic style, Ben Doherty, a senior journalist at The Guardian, introduces Boochani's reportage as a 'literary' style: "He uses symbolism. He draws inspiration from nature. He makes analogies. And it was very evocative and imaginative language." (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [07:06](#)).

Boochani's distinct language in reflecting the tragedy of Manus was unconventional in covering the issues of asylum seekers and refugees. Hoda Afshar has emphasized some of the stylistic differences between Boochani's work and other journalists': "It was very much poetic, mythical, and fictional. He would write about love. He would break the objective language of journalism in his writing." In an objective style, the author removes herself and her imagination from the narrative. However, during his journalism in Manus, according to Afshar, Boochani realized that if he wanted to succeed, he had to write subjectively and convey his own truth: "You can only make people feel and understand when it comes from here (your heart). There is no truth but like here, your truth" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [08:25](#)). In the film, Boochani's innovative approach to journalism and amalgamation of poetic expression with journalistic reportage is extensively discussed. However, as Boochani himself pointed out in film, he gradually realized that journalism, even with a transformed language, is not sufficient on its own to alter the discourse shaping the invisibility of refugees and the public's ignorance. That is why he "shifted his work to cinema, literature, [and other mediums] in order to 'share this tragedy' with a broader audience and with a broader range of creative devices (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [05:42](#)).

As the film illustrates, Boochani did not limit his experimental approach and his disidentification with the offshore detention to journalism solely. The individuals whom I interviewed were some of Boochani's most significant collaborators during his prison years and

afterwards. As detailed above in the chapter, Boochani collaborated with these individuals on various projects spanning journalism, academic writing or conversations, photography, playwriting, filmmaking, and book writing. The film aimed to present the variety of Boochani's creative endeavors by featuring a diverse set of his collaborators, each active in a distinct domain, be it art, literature, translation, or advocacy. In describing the reasons for Buchani's extensive collaborations with individuals in various artistic and advocacy fields, Ben Doherty points out in the film that through this approach, Boochani has been able to reach a wider audience: "I think he felt the importance of what he had to say and he felt that it needed to reach as wider audience as possible. And the way to reach that is to find them where they are" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 57:52). Donna Miles adds another aspect to this analysis, stating that Boochani's story is 'compelling' and "lends itself so well to playwriting, filmmaking, [and] book writing" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 58:41). Additionally, given that Behrouz has integrated himself as an 'inseparable' element within the stories he conveys across different mediums, his narrative presents captivating angles that attract collaborators (Mostolizadeh, 2023 40:07). Using different creative mediums in the film has been introduced as an effective tool to counteract the politics that are designed to make asylum seekers invisible and disidentify the marginalizing discourse surrounding their plight.

Arnold Zabel describes a spectrum of creative endeavors in the film, highlighting Behrouz Boochani's diverse artistic engagements as depicted in the film (Mostolizadeh, 2023 58:55). Zabel demonstrates how Boochani skillfully maneuvers through various genres and mediums within this continuum. On one end, Boochani's immediate reactions are exemplified by tweets and social media posts, offering timely insights on unfolding events. Further along, moving toward works with greater depth, Zabel emphasizes Boochani's journalistic articles,

especially those evocative narratives that pay tribute to individuals who tragically lost their lives in detention. Zabel also underscores Behrouz's poetry, identifying specific poems as robust vehicles for social justice advocacy. Music is another facet Zabel highlights within this spectrum, recognizing Boochani's talent as a singer of Kurdish songs. Boochani's artistic endeavors extend to the other end of the spectrum, characterized by deeper pursuits such as visual storytelling through photojournalism, film, and memoir. Allowing for further reflection and deeper analysis, Arnold Zable posits Boochani's memoir at the opposite end of the spectrum, establishing it as a poignant testament to the Manus Island experience. Although Zable recognizes the importance of the various mediums through which Boochani has worked, he emphasizes that it is Boochani's more foundational works, such as his memoir, that have defined him as a respected activist and artist, leaving the most enduring impact: "In the long run, it is [...] the big work that has the impact" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 56:14). Capacities of art and literature make them enduring and timeless mediums capable of transcending the physical borders, as well as the limitations of time, space, and even technology (Grasso, 2022). Perhaps one of the reasons I decided to turn this project into a film instead of writing a conventional thesis chapter was precisely this.

The narrative of the film brings into attention some other qualities within Boochani's works that make him able to transcend the boundaries of invisibility. Omid Tofighian describes Boochani's work as a fusion of several different genres and styles (Mostolizadeh, 2023 6:11). Boochani, through various creative mediums he explored, constructs his own truth that is "mixed with imagination, emotions, fantasies, reality" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 08:25), as Afshar mentioned in the film. This resonates with Rancière's notion of fictionalization, where the reordering of images and representations disrupts the conventional sense of reality, echoing voices of invisible subjects. Rancière argued that "the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought" (Rancière,

2004 p.34). In Rancière's view, the structure of fiction is not in contrast to what the basis of reality is. Instead, both are first and foremost follows a 'structure of rationality': "It is a mode of presentation of things that cuts out a frame and places elements within it so as to compose a situation and make it perceptible and intelligible" (Rancière, 2018 p. 269).

Structure of rationality is connecting events to make them coexist or follow one another, while also establishing causal connections between them. This connection gives the events a sense of meaning and reality, making them appear as either real, possible, or necessary. Instead of emphasizing the factual accuracy of information, the emphasis on fictionalized realities centers on the logical sequencing and portrayal of events. This approach aims to reframe perceptions, making them more tangible and understandable. In the film, the blending of genres is introduced as one of the devices Boochani uses for fictionalizing, intertwining different times and places, and combining his personal world with the realities of the prison. This device has helped amplify his voice and transform his writing into tools for advocacy. For example, Arnold Zable, a renowned writer himself, speaks of his encounter with the first paragraph of the book in one of the early sequences of the film. What had managed to influence Arnold was precisely this fusion in his work: "I remember that very quickly, from the first paragraph, which is basically the book begins now. As a writer, I thought it was extraordinary. His prose and then his passages of poetry and then, there are chants. It moves, you-know... it crosses genres without apology, and it just moves" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 03:13).

In a scene from the film where voiceover by Zabel is played, Boochani is shown riding a mountain bike on a sandy beach alongside the sea, and even in the water. The image, which combines two not-so-harmonious elements, helps to add a sense of the contributor's message. Events must be transformed into a narrative, so that they can be comprehended and enjoyed by

the audience. Boochani has employed various literary techniques, narrative devices, and artistic strategies to construct a narrative style which is compelling and engaging for the audience blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction ([Surma, 2022](#)).

I incorporated some of Boochani's works into the film, including Boochani's foreword, "Broken Guitar" ([Boochani, 2020](#)) that is read at a university event by one of the panelist ([Mostolizadeh, 2023 20:22](#)), or overlaying Boochani's romantic poetry on images of birds flying over the ocean ([Mostolizadeh, 2023 01:00:12](#)), the sequence that is located in the last 15 minutes of the film, before love is brought up in the film as a theme. These scenes allow the audience to not only become acquainted with Boochani's works indirectly through the participants' descriptions but also to directly engage with and experience Boochani's creations in a sensorial way. Boochani's work in these scenes evokes vivid images that engage the reader's senses and fosters the themes discussed in the film.

The story of the 'Broken Guitar' right after the section discussing Boochani's unique writing style in journalism provides us with an example of his work ([Mostolizadeh, 2023 20:50](#)):

On a hot day on Manus Island, Australian guards entered the refugee prison-camp and snatched a young man's broken guitar from his hands. As they left with triumphant looks on their faces, the young man followed them as far as he could inside the prison, beseeching them to return his guitar to him. He was repeatedly told in no uncertain terms that he should forget about it. When asked why, they said that it was forbidden to keep musical instruments in prison, as he might hang himself with the strings of the guitar. This surreal scene depicts the life of a musician in a far-away prison on a distant island, a man whose only possessions were a pair of slippers and a broken guitar. The system that administers the camp and is the source of all the psychological and physical violence prevailing in it, reveals its terrifying face when confronted with music and musical instruments, the most beautiful things in the world. Music and art are defined and condemned as instruments of violence: music, which by nature is liberating and life-giving, is represented as something that can destroy life.

The film, beyond highlighting the poetic essence of the text, juxtaposes the aesthetics of resistance and concepts of beauty against the backdrop of an oppressive regime dehumanizing

and subjugates asylum seekers. The politics and logic by which a broken guitar, a symbol of art and humanity, becomes a contentious issue and is viewed as a threat and offer a harrowing glimpse into the dehumanizing conditions faced by refugees on Manus Island. The story also sheds light on the nuanced experiences of refugees within offshore detention centers. By taking away the guitar, the guards did not just take an object; they tried to crush the spirit and identity of the refugee. However, the story highlighted in the film can symbolize the resilience and persistence of the human spirit amid adversity and their efforts to disidentify with the dominant regime.

Another characteristic of Boochani's creative work that I have tried to depict in the film is his approach to the image and representation of refugees. Arash Kamali Sarvestani, who co-directed the film 'Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time,' with Behrouz, unpacks Boochani's life-centered approach in representations of refugees: Behrouz found that (Australians) are more interested to see asylum's misery and cries, to see refugees humiliated. But I want them to see our life instead" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [7:50](#)). Along with challenging the image of refugees as victim or burden, the film provides a vibrant portrayal of the refugees as individuals who can contribute to society. For example, Mounes Mansoubi comments on the impact left by Boochani's works, saying: "[He] just shows like the public, just to Australians to the world that they are human, they are creative, they've got lots knowledge, talents, they've got lots of things to contribute to society, it is definitely like change the way and perspective of people who are just listening to the media or just listening to the government or just listening to see what politicians say" (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [41:56](#)). Boochani's representations effectively challenge and disrupt the established borders upheld by the Australian government between refugees and the public, incurring a staggering cost from taxpayers' money. Boochani's creative work

deliberately avoids depicting scenes of subjection or sensationalizing refugee suffering, as typically portrayed in mainstream media (Hartman 1997; Lenette & Miskovic, 2018). My film follows Boochani's lead in this respect.

Following Boochani's empowering representations of refugees, the image that the film portrays of him is of a lively, playful, and active individual who places great importance on his own physical and mental well-being. Hoda Afshar's account of her first face-to-face meeting with Boochani is filled with moments that demonstrate his zest for life, cheerfulness, and desire to live, even under the tragic conditions of Manus:

When I first met Behrouz on Manus, I faced a kid who was really different from Behrouz Boochani's character on Twitter and in his writing. I saw an inner child of his, and I couldn't believe this child was still alive. He was naughty, full of liveliness, and at the same time prolific. He had a strong sense of humour and he was full of life, in that space (prison). Honestly, seeing Behrouz in that atmosphere was one of the strangest shocks of my life. He was hanging from trees, flying, jumping, and he had a wonderfully strange energy (Mostolizadeh, 2023 51:14).

Images of Boochani playing ball with a child, who is actually my son, and a scene where he playfully jumps on large rocks by the sea, help to enhance the sense of narrative in this scene. This scene deepens the narrative by visually echoing the point being made. The way the imagery is crafted here stands apart, offering a subtle refusal of the usual portrayals of asylum seekers as passive figures, stripped of their sense of self, individuality, and freedom under an oppressive system.

In the film, there is a relatively long two-and-a-half-minute sequence, excerpted from the 'Manus' theatre. Directed by Nazanin Sahamizadeh, one of the participants in this dissertation, it features an Iranian cast performing in Farsi. The theater went on stage in Iran, India, and Adelaide, Australia. Interestingly, when this theater was performed in Adelaide, Boochani and several other refugees featured in the work were still confined on Manus and Nauru by

Australia's offshore regime. The scene, which is a cut from Australia's performance, recreates one of Boochani's most iconic resistances in Manus. In response to the authorities' decision to relocate him to another camp, he climbed, nearly naked, to the top of a tall tree inside the prison, threatening to jump if his demands were not met. Since the play of the 'Manus' theater is based on interviews with eight detained refugees from Manus and Nauru and produced in a verbatim style, the monologue included in the film is actually Boochani's own description of one of his most symbolic resistances. The scene represents the resistance of a passionate poet against a harsh bureaucratic system:

There is a single tree in the middle of the prison. It is really difficult to climb the tree. But I am a countryman. I could climb it really easily. I reached too high. I threatened that I would throw myself down. The night before, I had written two articles. I also wrote a statement, a political statement about Manus. I climbed up that tree well-prepared. I climbed that tree as a poet. I had a theatrical feeling. I was feeling like an actor, an actor on the stage. I was up there for 10 hours. I gave people three speeches. All the people came together, refugees all came to watch me and I talked to them poetically. Like a real anarchist, like a crazy poet (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [24:30](#)).

The solitary tree, standing resilient in the midst of the prison setting, became Boochani's stage, transforming the surroundings into a powerful theater of resistance. Behrouz Boochani's theatrical act of resistance in this scene and the brief anarchy he established to reclaim his political subjectivity within a bureaucratic regime of violence can symbolically highlight the profound impact that creativity and art can have in empowering those who are marginalized. Art and creativity can be anarchic force in this context provides a means to challenge and transcend the imposed limits on freedom of expression and the enactment of political subjectivity.

The scene in the film is also an emphasis on how disidentification can manifest through non-verbal expression of bodies against oppressive regimes. Ozguc ([2017](#)) shows that within this context, bodies can function as a form of 'noise' challenging the hegemony of marginalizing forces, suggesting, "the noisy subject has the potential to create, interrupt, and transgress" the

borders of marginality (p. 78). Boochani utilized the tree-climbing event as an opportunity to disidentify norms of the prison, disseminate his political message, which garnered widespread media coverage at the time. These forms of resistance can be particularly powerful in a marginalizing space like Manus Prison, where traditional forms of resistance may be suppressed or inaccessible.

Demands for democratic values

Analyzing the documentary film through the lens of ‘creative subjectivation’ offers insightful perspectives on prominent themes that advocate democratic values. As Hoda Afshar, the visual artist and one of Boochani’s collaborator mentions in the documentary film, Boochani skillfully presents a mirror to Australians, inviting them to observe the values that are violated in their society (Mostolizadeh, 2023 37:20). In the film, I have depicted a blue-colored mirror several times. One of these instances immediately follows Hoda Afshar's reference to the mirror, mentioning Boochani is holding up a mirror to Australian society, challenging their values (Mostolizadeh, 2023 37:45). In this scene, Boochani is walking by the sea with a blue-coloured mirror in his hand. This mirror serves not only as a guiding light towards the truth as Afshar frames in the film but can also epitomize the quest for truth and acknowledgment. The utilization of the blue color could symbolize serenity, depth, and even infiniteness – the proximity to the sea can further enhance this concept. This very mirror in the hands of the female character, Buddha, indicates a bond or affinity between these two characters. She has deeply influenced Boochani with her love, care, compassion, and kindness, as Boochani shows in one of the final sequences of the film (Mostolizadeh, 2023 1:12:44). This kinship can represent a profound, shared connection between them.

In the absence of governmental safeguarding and caring for asylum seekers and refugees, Boochani has suggested an alternative mode of politics in which refugees are ‘honourable’ individuals equal with the citizens (Boochani, 2022 p. 119). This is in line with Rancière’s perspective on politics, equality, and emancipation. Rancière’s politics is imbued with the pervasive notion of equality, which encompasses and influences all aspects of his discourse (Biesta, 2010). Rather than an outcome of a political procedure, equality for Rancière is the underlying assumption of those who act politically. Instead of being a possession exclusive to a political hierarchy, equality manifests the expression of individuals involved in politics (May, 2007). The “presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone” is a starting point for Rancière’s politics and aesthetics (Rancière, 1999 p. 17). Boochani has emphasized his and his fellow detained asylum seekers’ pursuit of equality as not only a foundational principle but also an ethical plea for solidarity from marginalized individuals to the broader Australian public (Surma, 2018).

Through a philosophical story, Omid Tofighian another contributor to the film, draws our attention in the documentary to the pivotal role of refugees in reviving the human values that have been discredited by the inhumane policies of the government (Mostolizadeh, 2023 38:05). Tofighian’s story presents a juxtaposition between two islands: one that symbolizes imprisonment and restrictions, and another that signifies freedom and critical thinking. The idea that Australia, rather than the individuals detained offshore, exists in a state of confinement offers an important reversal. This confinement is not physical but is shaped by Australia’s legal systems, social prejudices, and historical legacies. From this perspective, those held in offshore detention may paradoxically demonstrate a form of freedom. Their resilience, critical awareness, and capacity to imagine futures suggest an inner liberation that persists despite their restricted

circumstances. This contrast reveals a central irony. The policies intended to contain asylum seekers expose the deeper constraints that shape the state itself. In doing so, they challenge conventional assumptions about freedom and restriction.

Tofighian's narrative also emphasizes the often-overlooked knowledge and insights that refugees bring with them. Far from being mere victims or passive subjects, they emerge as teachers and creative individuals who, despite being ostracized, have a unique understanding of Australia, perhaps even surpassing that of its own citizens. Tofighian's story calls for a decolonization of imagination. By challenging dominant narratives and urging reconsideration of who truly holds knowledge and wisdom, the story underscores the transformative potential of refugees in shaping and enriching societies. The imagery of mirrors come after Tofighian's story offers a multi-layered representation (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [39:11](#)). Mirrors are often symbols of reflection, both literally and metaphorically. In the context of this scene, these mirrors during the sea, perhaps amidst an island, facing us, in continuation of Tofighian's story, represent the refugees that reflect back to society its own imperfections and challenges its notions of humanity, rights, and values. Refugees, despite their challenging circumstances, can indeed be teachers or the guiding reflection for the societies in the mainland. The scene is not just a visual spectacle but an evocative imagery urging viewers to reflect, reconsider, and recognize the profound truths and lessons that refugees bring to the forefront. In his radical political and ethical endeavor, Boochani serves as a key reminder to the Australian public, of what they have already lost or are perilously on the verge of losing: "[their] belief in [their] own plural humanity" ([Surma, 2018](#)) p. 523).

Hoda Afshar in the film points out that, like many Australians, she initially had a skeptical view of Behrouz and his works, thinking that there were hidden hands guiding him

(Mostolizadeh, 2023 35:44). However, reading Behrouz's manifesto in the Saturday Paper changed her perspective about Behrouz and, in fact, deeply moved her: “I read it several times and I cried with it” (Mostolizadeh, 2023 36:41). In Manifesto, Boochani wrote about the forgotten human values in the Australian society. He gently nudges Australian society, urging them to liberate themselves from the grip of their government’s dehumanizing policies. He reminds his audience about the lost values that “human has no sanctuary except within other human beings” where love and compassion reign as the guiding principles of our shared existence:

This mode of resistance and the message communicated by the imprisoned is nothing more than refugees asserting and putting into practice their values and their standpoints. They took this stance in order to return something valuable to majority of Australian public, to return what it has lost, or what it is in the process of losing. We formulated a schema of humanity that is, precisely, in polar opposition to fascist-thinking that created Manus Prison... Our resistance the spirit that hunts Australia. Our resistance is a new manifesto for humanity and love (Boochani, 2022 page 120-121).

By creatively advocating for democratic principles, Boochani aimed to dismantle the hierarchies and power structures that perpetuate marginalization and inequality not only within the context of immigration detention but in all the other structures and institutions of society. His demands for democracy go beyond mere political participation; they encompass the need for inclusivity, respect for human dignity, and the recognition of the voices and agency of marginalized individuals.

Boochani employs human rights language in an evocative manner, enhanced by his poetic approach, as noted by Ben Doherty in the documentary film (Mostolizadeh, 2023 41:22). Doherty describes Boochani's work as “evocative,” possessing “a great sense of largeness” and a “very Gestalt perspective” (Mostolizadeh, 41:40). This richness in Boochani’s work highlights its profound ability to challenge oppressive systems and transform the audience. Boochani

invites the audience to critically reflect on the importance of equality and democratic values in shaping a just and inclusive society.

Reconfiguration

Unpacking the documentary film using the framework of ‘creative subjectivation’ reveals insights into key themes that promote reconfiguration. If we consider *disidentification* as a framework for understanding and navigating marginalizing spaces and positions of immigration detention in the film, and *the demand for democratic values* as the main principle of Boochani’s work, *reconfiguration* can be seen as the purpose of his creative endeavour. In a setting intentionally structured to obscure and isolate refugees, the film underscores the vital role of innovative human networking in exposing violent regimes, resisting destructive narratives, and maintaining and fostering the well-being of detained asylum seekers.

The power of mobilizations against marginalizing regimes, led by those who themselves have experienced marginalization, is usually rooted in building networks and establishing collaborative efforts among a diverse range of activist groups ([Tarrow, 1989](#)). An important aspect of Boochani's activism lies in his remarkable ability to establish and sustain nodes and networks of activism that have extended far beyond the confines of the prison walls ([Tofighian, 2023](#)). Boochani effectively dismantled the marginalizing networks of detention by forging new alliances and cultivating networks that fostered liberation and empowerment. In the film, the discovery of allies inside and beyond detention can be observed through three significant channels: collaboration, proactive networking, and personal networks.

Boochani has collaborated with a diverse range of artists, activists, journalists, and academics, engaging in numerous joint projects with them. In coordination with Behrouz

Boochani, I carefully selected some of his key collaborators for this project. The contributors to the film are among the prominent collaborators of Boochani. By engaging with individuals who possessed expertise and influence in various fields, Boochani was able to amplify his voice and reach a broader audience. Working with people in different creative and intellectual fields who were already established in their profession helped Boochani gain credibility and visibility.

Donna Miles emphasizes Boochani's belief in teamwork and collaboration in the film: “He believes that work should be done collaboratively. And that is indeed the reason of his success” (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [01:06:50](#)). Boochani’s collaborators extend his message to wider networks and facilitate his engagement with a wider range of audiences. Arnold Zable, who has known Behrouz since 2014 and collaborated with him on various projects, mentions in the film that Behrouz's inclination towards teamwork and collaboration has become a part of his identity.

The one thing, one thing we didn’t mention when we talked about the means [is] collaborations with Hoda Afshar, as a photographer, with Arash Kamali Sarvestani as a filmmaker, our collaboration as ... we in our dialogues, in our conversations and many many others ... I know he’s collaborated on a play that was performed in Iran ... you know, so that’s ... it’s a very ... very important aspect of who he is. I think not all creatives are collaborators (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [01:07:40](#)).

Allies are crucial for the success of refugees’ resistance as they can help mobilize public protesters, challenge the existing orders, and transform public perception of unwanted migrants into sympathetic and deserving individuals ([Nicholls, 2013](#)).

Despite his limited resources, poor and unreliable internet, and lack of proficiency in the English language, he utilized his limited means to establish national (within Australia), and global connections with journalists, writers, activists, academics, advocates, politicians, influencers, and the public through virtual platforms. Omid Tofighian, the co-writer, and translator of Boochani in many of his work, introduced a concept of ‘shared philosophical activities’ to conceptualize the type of collaboration Boochani, the team of translation, and the

publisher has established and maintained for the sake of translating and publishing *No Friend but the Mountains*. (Bennett & Tofighian, 2020 p. 749). Tofighian showed that collective effort was essential to overcome the challenges and hurdles Boochani faced. As Tofighian showed, Behrouz leaned on a close-knit support group from Iran and Australia for motivation and insights. This collaboration fostered a distinctive mutual purpose or united action, leading to a convergence of intentions that resulted in something truly remarkable (Bennett & Tofighian, 2020 p. 749).

Proactive networking has been another facet of Boochani's network of allies highlighted in the film. This proactive networking and the efforts made by Boochani to seek support from writers, creatives, academics, and journalists played a significant role in amplifying his voice, increasing visibility for his cause, and fostering a sense of solidarity among writers and journalists. Arnold Zable, the Australian writer, and activist featured in the documentary chapter, highlighted this particular aspect of Boochani's journey. Zable emphasized in the film, Boochani's proactive approach in reaching out to writers and seeking support from journalists:

Behrouz wanted to make contact with writers. He wanted to be known as a writer. So, that happens very early, and he sent me some chapters to look at. He wanted a conversation between writers from very early on. Behrouz was very very proactive in saying why don't we get writers, support from writers... why don't we get support from journalists...Boochani was a total force in terms of connecting and communicating and all of this (Mostolizadeh, 2023 27:51).

Boochani actively sought support from writers and journalists, demonstrating an immense drive in networking and communication. The proximity of activists from around the world, united by a shared purpose of safeguarding the rights of marginalized migrants, can foster trust, emotional solidarity, and reduce uncertainties, thereby strengthening collective efforts (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). Boochani's activism served as a testament to the transformative potential of creative resistance when it is supported and connected to essential networks (Tofighian, 2022). By collaborating and networking with like-minded individuals, organizations, and communities, he

harnessed the power of collective action and established a network of support that bolstered his efforts. Arnold Zable, the former president of PEN Australia explained how Boochani's network has expanded and grown through him to other effective networks (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [01:09:33](#)). Boochani's proactive approach played a vital role in mobilizing these collaborations, leading to garnering widespread support.

The last characteristic of Boochani's network in the film is highlighted as the personal support group. This mode of network and networking, which encompasses personal connections, is well described by Zable in the film as 'networks of friendships' that provided moral support and fostered reciprocal relationships (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [01:10:02](#)). The literature on the critical citizenship extensively explored the beneficial impacts of 'social networks' on the overall well-being of refugees and migrant communities ([Calhoun 2010; Chatty, Mansour & Yasin, 2013; Buscher, 2011](#)). Having a strong and trustworthy bond with the people outside detention not only provided Boochani with emotional and practical support but also served as a source of acknowledgement and resilience. This aspect is further elaborated upon in the following quote from Boochani, which is also featured in the documentary film.:

Having intellectual conversation with people who were outside helped me a lot. In that suffocating atmosphere, I had the opportunity to talk to intelligent people a lot...Look, these are really important. All these things helped me stay mentally healthy. I mean I might not have had these opportunities. You would be recognized in a conversation. I mean you are intellectually recognized, while you are engaging in a conversation. We admire each other when talking (Mostolizadeh, 2023 [01:08:28](#)).

Such networks of friendship and intellectual exchange underscore the profound human need for acknowledgment, especially in circumstances designed to suppress and devalue individual identities.

Maintaining meaningful connections with individuals outside of detention through social media and online platforms played a vital role in Boochani's ability to survive and maintain his mental and emotional well-being. Australia's management of immigration detention centers employs the oppressive practice of gender segregation, designating Manus Island exclusively for male asylum seekers and Nauru for the incarceration of females and families. This gender-based segregation has had profound consequences, not only on the predominantly 20 to 40-year-old refugees detained on Manus Island but also on the local community (Rooney, 2023). Although the offshore detention system restricts romantic relationships, online platforms allowed Boochani to maintain meaningful long-distance connections. The emotional closeness and support he received from his partners during the detention played a crucial role in his resilience and ability to endure harsh conditions. During an environment where his human rights were consistently undermined, love provided Boochani with a profound sense of self-worth and humanity. This transformative power of love is evident in how Boochani articulates his relationship in the film:

Love in Manus, I mean having a relationship with a woman, like being in love ... yes, it's true that it was online, but it was so close...I want to say that an important piece of that jigsaw puzzle that made me survive, was love; because love is not just about the beauty, or creation. It gives you self-esteem.... In that atmosphere, love presents you self-esteem as a human, right? You are human, right? You are a human, and another human loves you, you know? (Mostolizadeh, 2023 01:12:00)

Through the presence of love from another person, Boochani's creativity was ignited, his worth affirmed, and his resolve to resist the dehumanizing system strengthened.

Boochani brought asylum seekers to life, portraying them not as powerless detainees but as individuals with inherent human characteristics. According to Canning (2023), the shattered dignity of refugees and asylum seekers under Australia's border regime “carefully reconfigured through [Boochani’s] tales of friendship, community and mutual aid” (p. 89). The way Boochani underscored the transformative power of empathy and the potential for humanity within the

confines of a dehumanizing system has made Boochani a unique and compelling voice that challenges conventional narratives and sheds light on the resilience of the human spirit.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to highlight the liberating role of art, literature, and creativity in overcoming the invisibility imposed by anti-asylum politics of states on asylum seekers and refugees. Within this study, art' as an inclusive term covering various creative expressions was not solely viewed as a method for knowledge creation, self-expression, visibility, and political assertion. Art was also recognized as a tool to expose the brutality of anti-refugee regimes, a catalyst for activism and the formation of advocacy networks capable of transcending even the harshest migration and border control measures.

Unpacking the resistance journey and creative works of Behrouz Boochani, who was detained in various Australian offshore 'processing centres,' which we referred to as prisons in this research, in Papua New Guinea for over six years (from 2013 to 2019), this study employs the theoretical lens of 'creative subjectivation' to introduce a novel framework for understanding the emancipatory role of art within refugee activism. Boochani's creative resistance offers profound insights into how creativity embodies survival, resilience, empowerment, disruption, and advocacy within oppressive migration regimes. This study positions Boochani's resistance as both a deeply personal struggle and part of a broader collective fight against the marginalization of asylum seekers. This study, and specifically my analysis presented as a documentary film, demonstrates how storytelling can highlight an individual's journey while also shedding light on shared struggles and hopes, thereby revealing broader systemic and global challenges.

On a personal level, Boochani's resistance was a battle; an effort to disidentify from a cruel governing regime and to reclaim his own political subjectivity. However, Boochani's distinctly creative pursuit reveals a unique aesthetic encompassing elements of beauty, humanity, optimism, delight, festivity, dignity, and affection in the face of a harsh, aggressive, and

dehumanizing regime (Tofighian, 2023). This creative endeavor forms a counter-politics characterized by a singular aesthetic, dismantling the very architecture of Australia's migration governance and border complex. A counter-politics that accentuates fundamental values of equality and humanity, standing as an open call of action for us to join Boochani in dismantling the oppressive borders and border regimes.

This study unpacks how creative subjectivation enables asylum seekers to navigate and resist bureaucratic systems of control. Through creative expression, they expose injustices, assert agency, and reframe their narratives. Boochani's creative work transcends the confines of detention, turning the tools of erasure into platforms of resistance. His creative oeuvre, as a form of political subjectivation, demonstrates how creativity can disrupt oppressive systems by exposing their contradictions and amplifying marginalized voices, while simultaneously fostering solidarity across physical and ideological borders. By turning personal experiences of confinement into universally resonant narratives, Boochani's work not only challenges dehumanizing regimes but also invites collective action and shared understanding beyond the immediate context of detention.

In this study, social capital extends beyond networks and resource exchange to include solidarity, cultural production, and collective resistance. Bourdieu (1986) frames social capital as the accumulation of resources and relationships embedded within social networks, which individuals or groups can mobilize to their advantage. In the offshore detention context, this value is not simply about survival but about resisting and reconfiguring the power structures that seek to dehumanize detainees.

Cultural capital, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986), encompasses non-material assets such as education, language skills, and artistic proficiency. Boochani's advanced education in

political science, his multilingual fluency, and his background in journalism and literature exemplify his rich cultural capital. These skills, shaped further by his lived experience as a Kurdish minority in Iran, enabled him to articulate his story in ways that resonated with diverse audiences and transcended cultural and linguistic barriers.

Crucially, these forms of capital (social and cultural) intersect in Boochani's resistance. As Putnam (2000) suggests, social capital is not merely a resource for individual advancement but a means of strengthening communal ties and fostering collective efficacy. Boochani's creative oeuvre (especially his memoir, *No Friend but the Mountains*, and the documentary *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*) exemplifies this intersection by serving as both an act of personal storytelling and a form of collective resistance. Through his creative acts of resistance, Boochani mobilizes social capital to amplify the voices of detained refugees while using his cultural capital to reframe the refugee experience in a way that challenges the dehumanizing policies of Australia's offshore detention regime.

Symbolic capital, which Bourdieu (1986) defines as the recognition and legitimacy granted to other forms of capital, plays a pivotal role in Boochani's success and global influence. His ability to win prestigious awards, such as the Victorian Prize for Literature, not only legitimized his work within literary and activist circles but also amplified its reach, enabling him to transcend the barriers imposed by his confinement. These accolades elevated his voice as a prominent critic of Australia's offshore detention policies, transforming him into a 'cause célèbre' for progressive audiences. This transformation underscores the power of symbolic capital to turn personal narratives into vehicles for systemic critique, as Boochani's visibility helped illuminate the broader injustices of detention and asylum systems.

Symbolic capital, as shaped by the politics of recognition, privileges some refugee narratives over others. Boochani's visibility highlights how success can be both a platform for resistance and a reflection of selective legitimacy. As Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) argue, the politics of deservingness often valorize stories that align with Western ideals of resilience, intellectual achievement, or cultural sophistication, sidelining those that do not fit this mold. These dynamic highlights the dual-edged nature of symbolic capital: while it can amplify voices and challenge oppressive systems, it also risks reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies within the very structures it seeks to critique.

Although detainees are systematically deprived of economic resources in detention, Boochani's growing visibility allowed him to access funding and institutional support for his projects. Economic capital, often mediated through social and cultural networks, played a pivotal role in transforming his creative resistance into impactful outputs. Like other detainees, Boochani employed inventive strategies to obtain financial resources and use them to his advantage. For example, he smuggled a mobile phone by trading his cigarette ration with local guards and continued using similar methods to purchase credit for the phone. His ability to secure publishing deals for *No Friend but the Mountains* and funding for the documentary *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* and many more creative collaborations with people outside detention further demonstrates how economic capital can amplify marginalized voices when combined with social and cultural capital (Lin, 2001). These examples underscore the interplay of different forms of capital in resisting systemic oppression and creating avenues for advocacy and storytelling.

The offshore policy remains a pivotal component of Australia's strategy for governance of asylum seekers and refugees, set to a potential reactivation at any time. However, the

influence and achievements of advocacy networks and the resilience and resistance of refugees like Boochani is undeniable in altering the landscape of the immigration detention complex. For example, by June 2023, all Australian offshore processing centers in Manus and Nauru have shut down, marking the conclusion of nearly 11 years of the second phase of offshore processing on the Pacific islands. Moreover, Australia's High Court has ruled that the indefinite detention of immigrants as illegal, prohibiting the government from utilizing immigration detention as a form of imprisonment or punishment for refugees (Mc. 2023 Nov 14th). Furthermore, in December 2023, while I was in the midst of writing this conclusion, Boochani, alongside a group of activists, politicians, and refugees, launched a campaign at the Australian Parliament calling for a Royal Commission investigation into the operations of Australia's immigration detention regime. Boochani's presence on Australian soil and holding a media release inside Australia's most significant pillar of democracy, the Parliament, was particularly impactful. This occurred despite previous Australian authorities promising that none of the Manus refugees would ever set foot on Australian soil (Davidson, 2013 Nov 28th). However, Boochani standing in Parliament as a free man, speaking out for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, reflects not only his own determination but also the tireless work of other refugees and advocacy networks committed to making their voices heard. This is also evident in an article published by Boochani in The Guardian on the same occasion:

The Australian detention system was established to destroy us, but we refugees are still here, as testament to the many years over which we have been fighting for justice. Proving our existence through performance has been a key tactic at the heart of our fight and journey for years. Launching the inquiry alongside refugees and allies, there was once again performance: first, many years ago, we refugees were banished to Manus Island and Nauru to be out of sight and out of mind. But years later, today, we are standing here, fully visible, and calling for a royal commission and for justice. We stand here to remind everyone that we still exist (Boochani, 2023 Dec 1st).

While Boochani's creative activism exemplifies the transformative potential of political subjectivation, it also raises important questions about the broader applicability and risks of romanticizing such resistance, particularly in contexts where access to creative resources is limited. Not all asylum seekers have access to the intellectual, social, or material resources needed to engage in similar acts of resistance. The valorization of creativity risks marginalizing those who resist in less visible or less celebrated ways, perpetuating a hierarchy of agency that privileges certain forms of resistance over others. As Ticktin (2016) argues, such valorization can unintentionally replicate the very exclusionary logic it seeks to dismantle by framing resistance as an individual responsibility rather than a collective or systemic struggle. The 'performative' approach Boochani highlighted in the quotation above speaks to the essence of his and his fellow refugees demands for visibility and justice. This 'performativity' is not limited to artistic or theatrical gestures; it is a deliberate and symbolic way for refugees to claim their space, make their voices heard, and highlight their continuous fight for justice. It encompasses creative actions and expressions aimed at affirming the existence, visibility, and rights of asylum seekers, countering attempts to marginalize or erase them. Boochani's transformation from absolute invisibility at the beginning of his detention on Manus to a significantly noticeable level of visibility and influence within Australia's official discourse and politics appears noteworthy, further reinforces the significance of this study in unpacking his creative resistance.

Moreover, the impact of creative subjectivation must be situated within a systemic critique. Walters (2011) and Fassin (2011) emphasize that while Boochani's resistance challenges oppression, it does not dismantle systemic structures on its own. As Fassin (2011) argues, genuine transformation requires not just visibility but a fundamental shift in legal and

political frameworks governing migration. Systemic transformation, as Fassin (2011) discusses, requires more than just the visibility of individual figures; it demands an overhaul of the political and legal frameworks that govern migration, asylum, and refugee status. In this regard, Boochani's impact is best understood as part of a larger collective movement rather than the isolated achievement of one individual.

While Boochani's recognition as a *cause célèbre* by the Western audiences is significant and his success inspires hope, there is a risk that his individual acclaim could overshadow or divert attention from the urgent need for a more comprehensive critique of the system itself, obscuring the everyday realities of asylum seekers who remain unseen and unheard. As Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) caution, commodifying such stories can create spectacles that distract from the deeper violences of the border regime. This challenge can be countered by highlighting that the transformative impact of detainees' resistance lies in collective struggle, not individual exceptionalism.

Boochani's transformation as a political subject represents an important breakthrough within the asylum experience, but it must be situated within the context of the collective struggle for refugee rights. Unpacking personal experiences like Boochani's are vital to understanding the lived realities of refugees. They provide insight into how systemic violence is navigated and contested. However, their transformative impact lies not solely in the individual act but in how they contribute to systemic critique and collective mobilization. This project calls for a broader, more inclusive understanding of political subjectivation. One that values creativity but equally recognizes the resilience and resistance of those whose struggles may not be artistic or visible yet are no less significant. Boochani's work demonstrates that even in the most isolated and

controlled environments, creativity remains a potent force for challenging dehumanization and advocating for systemic change.

In this study, particularly in chapters 3 and 4, I established a contextual backdrop for Boochani's narrative, aiming to provide a better understanding of the environment where his resistance took shape. I explored pervasive trends contributing to the marginalization and invisibility of asylum seekers, as well as the erosion of their rights to seek protection, across different macro, meso, and micro levels. The offshore detention of asylum seekers in a third country is a manifestation of such marginalizing trends—a brutal policy designed to deter asylum seekers while evading legal obligations to safeguard them. Deterrence of mass migration waves often serves as the primary rationale for the adaptation and implementation of policies like offshore processing (Mountz, 2020). Boochani argued that creation of torturous conditions for refugees, during their indeterminate detention offshore, to discourage them from seeking asylum in Australia is among the main reasons for Australia's offshore policies (Mc, 2023 Nov 14th). Based on this logic, the increased border enforcement, coupled with aggressive interception, detention, and border deportation, will dissuade prospective migrants from crossing borders. However, extensive research consistently demonstrates that intensifying enforcement, interception, and detention does not effectively deter migrants (Nevins, 2010; Andersson, 2014; Mountz, 2020). Contrarily, these enforcement actions are detrimental, disruptive, and unsustainable in numerous aspects. They lead to prolonged periods of insecurity, frequently retraumatizing individuals who have fled (Molnar, 2020). Furthermore, they curtail the involvement of asylum seekers in normal social and economic cycles, significantly impacting people's livelihoods.

Australia, as the largest executor of the offshore processing as a model of migration governance since 2001, presents numerous indications of the policy's failure. Australia maintains the longest average duration of immigration detention, standing at 689 days on average (Knaus and Doherty, 2022 February 16th). Apart from the irreplaceable human costs this policy has imposed on the lives of thousands of refugees, it has also misspent billions of dollars from Australian taxpayers. Between 2012 to December 2018, the regional processing centers located in Nauru and Manus Island incurred expenses amounting to \$6.6 billion ([ASRC, 2019](#)). Despite Australia's unsuccessful experience and the warnings from human rights activists and refugee advocates, we occasionally witness other countries resorting to Australia's model to block the entry of asylum seekers. For example, in 2013, Israel entered undisclosed agreements with Uganda and Rwanda to relocate individuals seeking asylum from Eritrea and Sudan ([Norris, 2022 Apr 14th](#)). Despite being portrayed as voluntary, those from Eritrea and Sudan faced a coercive decision: either undergo indeterminate detention in the Holot facility in Israel or sign a document to depart 'voluntarily'. However, the Israel's Supreme Court halted the transfer of asylum seekers to Africa in 2019 (Bhalla & Taylor, 2024). Denmark had a comparable asylum policy proposal and reached an agreement with Rwanda in 2022 to relocate the asylum center there. However, the discussions were paused due to a shift in Denmark's political party (Ahmed, 2023 January 25th). In a similar instance, an agreement called Rwanda Solution was made between Britain and Rwanda in April 2022 to relocate asylum seekers arriving in the U.K. by boat to this East African country for processing their applications ([Beirens & Davidoff-Gore, 2022](#)). Whilst the UK Supreme Court dismissed this contentious government proposal in November 2023, the government announced its commitment to proceeding with the offshoring plan in Rwanda through a series of legal loopholes ([Casciani & Seddon, 2023 Nov 15th](#)).

Similarly, Italy and Albania signed an agreement in November 2023 to establish and run two facilities in Albania, where individuals saved at sea by Italian vessels, including asylum seekers, would be detained indeterminately ([De Pieri, 2023 Nov 7th](#)). Examples mentioned above indicate that other nations have not learned from the humanitarian disaster created by Australia in Manus and Nauru. This emphasizes the need for additional research not just on the offshore processing regimes, but also on the pushbacks, struggles, and resistance efforts that challenge policies hostile to asylum and immigration.

Theoretically, my study has contributed to critical citizenship and migration studies by introducing the concept of 'creative subjectivation' and its three modes. The idea of creative subjectivation, inspired by the philosophy of the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. Rancière viewed political subjectivation as occurring during moments of disruption, emphasizing the close association of this process with 'dissensus'. Opposing consensus politics, political subjectivation opens avenues for fresh political possibilities through dissent and contestation (Rancière, 2011). While several scholars in critical citizenship and migration studies have engaged with Rancière's ideas in exploring issues related to asylum seekers and refugees (Squire, [2010](#), [2015](#); [Schwartz, 2022](#); [Lewicki, 2017](#)), the application of his politics in this literature not widespread. In this research, I have moved beyond referencing Rancière as one theoretical lens among many. Instead, I positioned his concept of political subjectivation at the heart of my analysis, integrating it as the primary theoretical foundation such as acts of citizenship and the autonomy of migration. This approach allowed me to foreground how creative resistance operates as a form of political subjectivation, offering new ways to conceptualize agency, visibility, and resistance in the context of marginalizing migration regimes.

Creative subjectivation serves as an analytical tool, facilitating exploration into the transformation of marginalized migrants from targets of state anti-migration policies to active political participants. While primarily rooted in empirical findings from offshore immigration detention contexts, 'creative subjectivation' reveals the potentials of art and creative activism in other marginalizing contexts where individuals' political subjectivity is undermined by governing regimes. The notion of 'creative subjectivation' underscores the fundamental significance of art and creativity as agents and facilitators of liberation. It establishes a communicative sphere that enables marginalized individuals to access agency, visibility, and empowerment. Creative subjectivation, as a transformative process, involves deconstructing prevailing frameworks and challenging established structures that perpetuate the marginalization of refugees and asylum seekers. The three modes of creative subjectivation I have proposed—disidentification, a demand for democratic principles, and reconfiguration— can be used in understanding similar contexts where marginalized individuals or groups seek to redefine their agency and challenge systemic injustices through a contested politics. Disidentification enables the rejection of marginalization within bureaucratic structures, while the pursuit of democratic principles represents marginalized groups' quest for equality and denied rights. Additionally, reconfiguration involves reshaping hierarchical identities through an egalitarian approach, asserting visibility and rights previously withheld.

Another significant contribution of this study is the innovative methodology that employed documentary filmmaking as a qualitative approach to collect, analyze, and communicate qualitative data gathered for this study. Embracing the 'visual turn' in social sciences (Mitchell, 2002; Moxey, 2008) and migration studies (Mitchell, 2002; Moxey, 2008), this study acknowledged film as an independent communicative entity that extends beyond

linguistic interpretations. Utilizing documentary filmmaking, I delved into the complexities of creative resistance within the context of offshore immigration detention wherein asylum seekers face strict invisibility due to the state's anti-asylum politics. While providing visibility, it is crucial to recognize that visibility alone does not necessarily grant "voice." Therefore, the documentary film methodology I used aimed not only to make the struggles of refugees and asylum seekers visible but also to amplify their voices and provide a platform for their narratives and resistance strategies to be heard and understood.

This research embodied a form of creative resistance, an extension of the activism initiated by refugees to disrupt and reshape the bureaucratic regime governing offshore detention. Adopting documentary film within the three key stages—conceptualization and research design, data collection, and data analysis, this methodological choice enabled a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of the resistance strategies and narratives cultivated by an asylum seeker such as Behrouz Boochani.

Collaborating with Boochani throughout this research infused a participatory essence into my work. Over almost three years, my fieldwork and documentary filmmaking for this research involved spending numerous hours with Boochani. I immersed myself in his life akin to an ethnographer/researcher while documenting it as a documentary filmmaker. The participatory engagement elevated Boochani's role in the research far beyond just participating in a few rounds of in-depth interviews or introducing insightful individuals within his networks. Involving Boochani in the collaborative filmmaking process reshapes authorship, extending it beyond the director and encompassing researcher, participants, the research question, and the medium itself. While this might seem to stray from Gaut's notion of film as primarily artistic (2010), I see this as a crucial step in recognizing film's significance within visual methodologies. Here, film

creation operates not solely as artistic expression but as a tool to advance the research inquiry, emphasizing filmmaking to acquire knowledge rather than an endpoint.

This participatory design not only fostered trust, unity, and mutual respect between Boochani and me, but also among other participants. It further empowered me to prioritize ethical considerations, ensuring a respectful and precise portrayal of refugees, their advocated alternative narratives, and the in-depth analysis of their resistance within the film and the entire study. The inclusion of documentary filmmaking as a methodological tool has contributed significantly to the ongoing exploration and advancement of visual methodologies in migration and refugee studies. The integration of documentary filmmaking as a methodological toolkit stands as a pivotal contribution of this research to the ongoing exploration and advancement of visual methodologies in migration and refugee studies. This inclusion not only expands the horizon of research methodologies in the field but also presents an innovative pathway towards understanding the complex narratives and lived experiences of displaced individuals. Moreover, the utilization of documentary filmmaking transcends the traditional boundaries of academia, bridging the gap between scholarly discourse and societal engagement by amplifying the voices and stories of those directly affected by migration policies.

In addition to the contributions of this study, it is essential to acknowledge and carefully consider its limitations. One of these constraints was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted changes to my initial research design. A major part of my fieldwork, spanning over more than 30 months from February 2020 to July 2023, coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. In my original design, instead of focusing on a single case study, I planned to investigate the creative resistance and narratives of multiple (former) asylum seekers from Manus Island, of which Boochani was one. When I commenced my fieldwork in February 2020,

I was living in New Zealand. During that time, apart from Behrouz Boochani—who came to New Zealand on an invitation to Christchurch for a literary festival and later sought asylum and remained in New Zealand—my other potential participants, three artist-activists, were taken from Papua New Guinea to Australia under Medevac law (Australian Parliament, 2019 February 13) which I explained in Chapter 4. I had intended to travel to Australia to conduct interviews and engage in ethnographic research with these participants. My intention was to conduct interviews and ethnographic research in Australia, yet border closures and restrictions, rendered travel largely impossible, except for exceptional circumstances.

Boochani's residency in New Zealand, alongside his keenness to collaborate and engage in my project, led me, with my supervisor's approval, to redesign my study, centering on Boochani as a key participant and a single case study. Widely acknowledged as the voice of Manus Island ([Doherty, 2019, Nov 14th](#)) and revered as one of the most celebrated refugees from Manus for his literary and artistic works, as well as his activism, Boochani's creative resistance provided unparalleled insights into studying the construction of political subjectivity within the marginalized spaces of immigration detention. While concentrating solely on Boochani as the single case study for this project led to sidelining the narratives of other initially intended asylum seekers, this revised approach empowered a more in-depth exploration of Boochani's resistance tactics, successful strategies, and the influential figures within his network. To accomplish this, I conducted 11 qualitative, in-depth interviews with individuals who had maintained professional or personal connections with Boochani for extended periods, ranging from three to eight years. Three of these individuals were former detainees of Manus. Conducting these interviews online allowed me to navigate the constraints imposed by COVID and gain virtual access to individuals residing in Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New

Guinea. Documenting Boochani's daily life in New Zealand after escaping the offshore detention, lent the study an ethnographic dimension and enhancing its depth. The process of establishing trust with Boochani for the filmmaking component required additional ethical considerations and a lengthy process, extending the project timeline.

This dissertation offers an in-depth exploration of the role of creative activism in challenging the invisibility imposed on refugees and asylum seekers by anti-asylum politics. To expand on this, future studies could consider several avenues. In this study, I shed light on the deep-seated violence within offshore immigration detention, shaped by layers of control at global, national, and local levels; each influenced by broader historical ties, colonial legacies, and global power dynamics. As shown by Mountz (2020), forthcoming research should further reveal the persistent influence of historical events on current occurrences, including the violence within detention centers that extend beyond their confines. Comparative research across various sites of offshore detention and further studies on individual and collective experiences of creative resistance offer broader insights into understanding the effective strategies of refugee activism, asylum advocacy, and the experiences of creative resistance. In addition, the conceptual framework of creative subjectivation suggested by this research can be applied in other contested contexts to develop further strategies for empowering marginalized individuals, dismantling oppressive regimes, and fostering social justice and inclusivity. Analyzing the impact of advocacy efforts on policy changes, such as the closure of Australian offshore processing centers on Manus and Nauru, could provide critical assessments of policy outcomes. Initiating and exploring creative methodologies and methods of investigation or interdisciplinary approaches by future researchers in studying anti-asylum politics can deepen understanding of resistance in the marginalizing spaces of migration. Continuing discussions on the ethics of participatory

research involving refugees, ensuring respect, consent, and meaningful collaboration is another avenue for enriching the ethical landscape of refugee studies and fostering more inclusive, impactful research methodologies.

Engaging with Stephen Cohen's fundamental questions seem like a fitting endpoint to this study, not merely concluding but opening spaces for reflection and provoking thoughts, prompting a broad avenue for future exploration: "What do we want with the images we create? What can our representatives possibly achieve?" (kohen, 2016, p. 148). As a researcher and filmmaker, my involvement in this study, shaped by Rancière's philosophy and Boochani's creative resistance, aimed to provide a redistribution of sensible, visible, and audible which is empowering. This sought to challenge the prevailing discourse and practices that prioritize securitized, economically driven, neoliberal perspectives perpetuated by many states in the Global North to marginalize and disappear asylum seekers and refugees. Film's distinctive ability "to express experience as experience" (Kohn, 2016 p.152) enables a reconfiguration of what is perceptible. It can integrate the migrant experience, previously unseen and unacknowledged within the existing structure, into the shared realm of visibility. Films and many other branches of art, as this research showed and became, have the ability to create new worlds and alternate realities disrupting established consensus, and broadening the scope of what can be expressed, perceived, experienced, and contemplated. Creative resistance, as a form of Rancierian dissensus, reclaims political subjectivity and opens space for imagining alternative futures. It reminds us that migration governance is not fixed. Borders, policies, and systems of exclusion do not exist naturally or permanently. They are shaped by particular historical and political circumstances, which means they can also be reimagined, contested, and changed. This study

calls for expanding our political imagination, embracing solidarity, and working toward a world where asylum seekers are not erased but recognized and appreciated.

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