Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship
Digital Frontiers 2019: Tear Down the Walls
Vol. 2, No. 1, 2022

Island of Migrants

Populations in Movement on Christmas Island

Stephanie Niu

Abstract

Christmas Island is a tiny island in the Indian Ocean, a few hundred miles off the coast of Java. The island is small, with a population of less than 2000. Yet in spite of, or maybe because of, its isolation, the island is a site of incredible movement. Every wet season, millions of endemic red crabs descend from the jungles in what is one of the most spectacular animal migrations in the world. In October or November, the crabs begin a long journey from the jungles down to the coast to breed, continuing an annual life cycle. The crab migration intersects the island's main roads and has resulted in a series of inventive tunnels, bridges, and fences which both protect the crabs from traffic and draw tourists from around the world.[1]

Another important population crosses Christmas Island on its migration journey, with considerably less luck. In 2007, construction was completed on an Immigration Reception and Processing Centre to temporarily detain asylum seekers from neighboring islands. In response to the 2001 Pacific Solution in which "4000 islands were excised from Australia's migration zone," Christmas Island became a temporary holding center for boat-bound asylum seekers from Indonesia, eventually transitioning to becoming an isolated site for long-term detention.[2] The center on Christmas Island is one of the largest in Australia's onshore detention center network, which continues to operate today.

For both animal and human populations, Christmas Island is the site of incredible movement. However, these two migrating populations are governed in very different ways. "Island of Migrants" is a 19-minute podcast episode that examines the ways in which red crab migration and asylum seeker migration are treated differently despite their close physical proximity on the island, and what this difference in their treatment reflects about who is considered worthy of protection. The podcast is a result of both anthropological and journalistic methods as well as a 2-month period of living on Christmas Island. Through firsthand accounts from islander residents, asylum seekers, and

[1] "Red Crab Migration." Australian Government. Parks Australia. Accessed December 16, 2019. https://parksaustralia.gov.au/christmas/discover/highlights/red-crab-migration/.

[2] Hearman, Vannessa. "Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia. By Antje Missbach." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 4 (January 2017): 628–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex031.

ISSN 2687-9018 (online)
https://journals.library.unt.edu/index.php/unbound/about

activists, "Island of Migrants" seeks to demonstrate the stakes of valuing one migration over another.

Background

Situated off the northwest coast of Australia, Christmas Island is an unassuming location. Shaped roughly like a Scottish Terrier, the island is home to a population that fluctuates around 1800 inhabitants. However, the recent history of Christmas Island reveals that the island is a microcosm of colliding populations, both biologically and socially. Current literature on the alienation or acceptance of migrant populations uses these varied lenses. Biological, historical, and anthropological literature address modes of alienation for both the asylum seekers of Christmas Island and the invasive species that threaten the Christmas Island red crabs. The existing literature addresses three primary themes: methods of alienation, opposition to or violence against asylum seekers, and locality on Christmas Island. Situated against this literature, "Island of Migrants" uses personal narrative to explore the way different migrations are valued and who is given permission to belong.

Existing work on methods of alienation for Australian asylum seekers focuses on language and media portrayal of asylum seekers. In recent years, Australia and its territories have seen a surge in the number of asylum seekers and refugees entering the country, either through the UNHCR program before or by arriving first and then seeking official entry.[3] This second category of people, termed "asylum seekers," has received widespread public criticism in Australia. Recent public opinion polls show "negative attitudes to boatpeople," whereas in the 1970s the majority of respondents favored allowing in a limited number of asylum seekers.[4] Much of the literature on alienation lies in response to this negative public opinion. Sharon Pickering's "Common Sense" [5] outlines three methods of alienation that media discourse creates: the invasive deviant, the racialized deviant, and the diseased deviant. These categories, while focusing on the role of media, extend beyond the current issue of asylum seekers to encompass historical reasons for excluding Chinese mine workers from being considered "indigenous" and traditional biological rhetoric around invasive species.

Negative sentiment around "the invasive deviant" is not unique to Australian culture. Saito[6] describes how opposition to "illegal immigrants" is strongly based on a sense of threat to national security even in the United States. Particularly in Australian media, a use of war rhetoric evokes militaristic paradigms of win-lose, in which keeping out "illegal" asylum seekers or "boat people" is a matter of warlike proportions.[7] For Australian asylum seekers, the Tampa incident of 2001 served as a turning point in focus on national security. A Norwegian cargo ship rescued approximately 450 Afghan asylum seekers and immigrants and headed for Australian shores. After "[laying] in limbo off Christmas Island," the ship was ultimately turned away. Polls showed that 77% of Australians supported keeping the passengers out, likely due to a

[3] Mckay, F. H., S. L. Thomas, and S. Kneebone. "It Would Be Okay If They Came through the Proper Channels: Community Perceptions and Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers in Australia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 1 (2011): 113–33. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fer010.

[4] Betts, K. "Boat People and Public Opinion in Australia." *People and Place* 9, no. 4 (2001): 34-48.

[5] Pickering S. "Common Sense and Original Deviancy: News Discourses and Asylum Seekers in Australia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 2 (2001): 169-186.

[6] Saito, Natsu Taylor. "Symbolism under Siege: Japanese American Redress and the Racing of Arab Americans as Terrorists." *Asian Law Journal* 8 (2001): p. 1-30.

[7] Pickering. "Common Sense." 169-186.

combination of racial stereotypes and feelings of threatened national security.[8] These sentiments have emerged in history before, from the U.S. Japanese internment during WWII[9] to more recent Muslim bans and the "war on terror."[10] Feelings of national security threats coupled with racial stereotypes are recurring themes in histories of exclusion, particularly of outsiders of a certain racial or ethnic group.

Like history has shown, feelings of national security being threatened are closely tied to racial stereotypes. Pickering's second method of alienation, "the racialized deviant,"[11] highlights exactly this. A 2012 study[12] found that negative sentiment toward asylum seekers is grounded in a sense of illegality or illegitimacy that is tied up in race. Mckay et al found that public perception of asylum seekers depends heavily on method of arrival (most asylum seekers arrive by boat), which implies some sense of illegitimacy; socio-political stereotypes linking Muslim males to terrorism; and information about asylum seekers that is limited by what news reports present. The close link between terrorism, national security, and people of Arabic descent often confounds the effects of national security and race. Beyond media rhetoric, even the rhetoric of political speeches plays a role in creating a racist construction of asylum seekers. By speaking about asylum seekers in categorical generalizations that portray them as culturally "other," speeches in Australian parliamentary debates use race to reinforce a sense of foreignness.[13] Even in a century before hyperawareness of terrorism and national security, race played a crucial role in exclusion. In the 1960s and 70s, the federal government of Australia was anxious to limit the presence of an indigenous population on Christmas Island in order to maintain it as a self-governing territory. This was in order to avoid UN scrutiny and press exposure that would result from the island becoming a non-self-governing territory. Despite there being an island-born population of over 300 in 1975, most of whom were Chinese, the federal government continued to negate the existence of an indigenous population by describing the island inhabitants as contract workers. [14] To this extent, workers were required to leave and reapply to work every 3 years to nullify any records of long-term residence. While this explicit, policy-driven alienation was not specific to the workers being Chinese, it was specific to the workers being non-Australian; policy specifically asked if the island was home to competing native populations, and this motivated the federal government to continually negate the existence of the Chinese workers there.

The third method of alienation, the diseased deviant, operates on similar rhetoric as the method of the invasive deviant. Coincidentally, this method has much in similar with traditional biological views of invasive species, but for different reasons. Pickering describes the method of the diseased deviant as a warlike rhetoric that uses terms like "medical screening" to imply imminent danger. This rhetoric implies that asylum seekers will "threaten the life of the host society."[15] In a similar way, biological terminology surrounding invasive species operates on

---

[8] Jayasuriya, Laksiri, et al. *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture, and Nation*: University of Western Australia Press, 2003.
[9] Saito, Natsu Taylor. "Symbolism under Siege: Japanese American Redress and the Racing of Arab Americans as Terrorists." *Asian Law Journal* 8 (2001): p. 1-30.
[10] Vu, Huong. "Us against Them: The Path to National Security Is Paved by Racism," *Drake Law Review* 50, no. 4 (2002): 661-694.
[11] Pickering. "Common Sense." 169-186.
[12] Mckay, Thomas, and Kneebone. "It Would Be Okay." 113–33.
[13] Every D, Augoustinos M. "Constructions of Racism in the Australian Parliamentary Debates on Asylum Seekers." *Discourse Society* 18, no. 4 (200): 411-436.
[14] Chambers, Peter. "Society Has Been Defended: Following the Shifting Shape of State through Australia's Christmas Island." *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 18–34. doi:10.1111/j.1749-5687.2011.00118.x.
[15] Pickering. "Common Sense." 169-186.

rhetoric of loss, permanent damage, and species health.[16] In *100 Of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species*, the first species listed is the yellow crazy ant, which has decimated red crab populations on Christmas Island (the ants killed 3 million crabs in 18 months). However, biological language describes imminent danger in terms of threatening biodiversity. In the case of the yellow crazy ants, who have the "ability to farm and protect sap-sucking scale insects, which damage the forest canopy on Christmas Island," [17] indigenous populations like the Abbott's booby are threatened by habitat loss. Biological invasiveness is concerned with a loss of diversity. However, in human terms, invasive populations are seen as threatening a homogeneity that exists, literally deviating from the norm.[18] While biology seeks to protect biodiversity and species richness, human societies have again and again sought to protect the homogeneity of their own cultures, citing national security, race, and disease as reasons to exclude populations that are different. The existing literature on the modes of "the deviant" highlight the role that media and political language play in alienating Australian asylum seekers.

Beyond methods of alienation, current literature also addresses the embodied nature of violence against asylum seekers. Coddington et al[19] describes the forms of protest that asylum seekers have taken in order to gain visibility, including lip sewing, rooftop protests, and other forms of self-harm. The negative media attention this has gained in addition to media portrayal of asylum seekers as protesting their immigration status (rather than their detention conditions) have created an increased sense of confinement and invisibility.[20] Coddington et al describes how the physical nature of detainee protest, particularly self-harm, "reveal[s] both struggles for recognition and the embodied effects of policies enacted far from sites of power."[21] While this embodied struggle has been documented, it has not been explicitly compared with the island's non-human migrants.

Finally, current literature addresses the concept of what it means to be "local" to Christmas Island with relation to both asylum seekers and red crabs. Dennis' *Christmas Island: An Anthropological Study*[22] cites the importance of movement as a defining feature of locality. Dennis describes three primary ethnic neighborhoods that comprise the island, noting how true locals are able to move between neighborhoods with comfort. In contrast, the detained asylum seekers present an image of stasis, making evident that "stopping or halting movement is remarkable in a place that otherwise bears the hallmarks of constant movement."[23] Beyond the human residents, Dennis describes the movements of the red crabs as blood. In "Seeing Red, Tasting Blood,"[24] Dennis describes the centrality of the red crabs as a sensory experience on Christmas Island. She describes the crab movement as it "circulate[s] around the island in a constant rhythmic flow, as would blood, along the ancestral arterial routes that take the crabs from the land to the sea," citing the visual, auditory, and kinetic qualities of the crab migration as analogous to the island's blood supply. Dennis' work brings the movement of humans and

---

[16] Abbott, K. L. "Supercolonies of the Invasive Yellow Crazy Ant, Anoplolepis Gracilipes, on an Oceanic Island: Forager Activity Patterns, Density and Biomass." *Insectes Sociaux* 52, no. 3 (2005): 266–273., doi:10.1007/s00040-005-0800-6.

[17] Lowe, Sarah J. *100 Of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species: a Selection from the Global Invasive Species Database*. ISSG (Invasive Species Specialist Group), 2004.

[18] Ibid., 169-186.

[19] Coddington, Kate, et al. "EMBODIED POSSIBILITIES, SOVEREIGN GEOGRAPHIES AND ISLAND DETENTION." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 27–48.

[20] "Asylum Seekers Sew Lips Together." ABC News, November 19, 2010. http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-11-19/asylum-seekers-sew-lips-together/2343854.

[21] Coddington. "EMBODIED POSSIBILITIES." 27–48.

[22] Dennis, Simone. *Christmas Island: an Anthropological Study*. Cambria Press, 2008.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Dennis, Simone. "Seeing Red, Tasting Blood: Sensual Citizenship on Christmas Island." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (2009): 186–199. doi:10.1080/14442210903104968.

crabs into conversation to define what makes one a local of the island. The importance of movement as local and stasis as foreign are key inspirations in examining the governance that keeps these populations in movement or in stillness.

Data Collection

Data collection for "Island of Migrants" primarily came from semi-structured interviews with selected participants during a 9-week period of residence on Christmas Island and Melbourne, from October to December of 2018. I conducted twenty interviews with a range of a range of key informants, including asylum seekers currently in detention, asylum seeker activists, long-time islanders, and park rangers (Fig. 4). Additional informants were discovered through snowball sampling.

I also conducted participant observation on Christmas Island and in MITA, the Melbourne detention center (Fig. 1 and 2). Outside of these primary sources, I also drew on secondary sources, including archival documents on Christmas Island, anthropological literature on Christmas Island, and literature on immigration detention in Australia.

Fig. 1: Visiting the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accomodation (left)
Fig 2: On-island observation (right)

In addition to anthropological methods, I drew on journalistic methods as well. Beyond asking narrative-driven interview questions, I also recorded ambient sounds on the island that had narrative power (Fig. 3). For example, I captured sounds of the red crabs crossing the bridge, of the call to prayer being projected over the island, and of park rangers hammering in crab fences to dry ground.


Fig 3: Collecting ambient sound (left)
Fig 4: A cliffside interview with island resident and visiting professor (right)

Analysis

After conducting these semi-structured interviews using a flexible set of guided questions written for each individual, I transcribed each interview and created selects, or small labelled clips, in audio. The audio editing software Hindenburg allows a group of clips to be saved non-destructively, meaning the original tape can yield several different groups of selects (Fig. 5). The process of choosing these clips can be done either using text (transcriptions) or audio (listening to tape). I worked primarily in audio initially to get a sense of vocal quality at different points in the tape; after audio selects, I worked on selects in the script, performing a textual analysis similar to focused coding using the transcription as text.[25] Since the process of interviewing for an audio podcast allows for more selectivity in interview subjects, similar to the format of a life history,[26] I primarily used focused coding, using the interview questions as a guide.

[25] Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
[26] Mintz, S. W. "The Anthropological Interview and the Life History." Oral History Review 7, no. 1 (1979): 18–26. doi:10.1093/ohr/7.1.18.

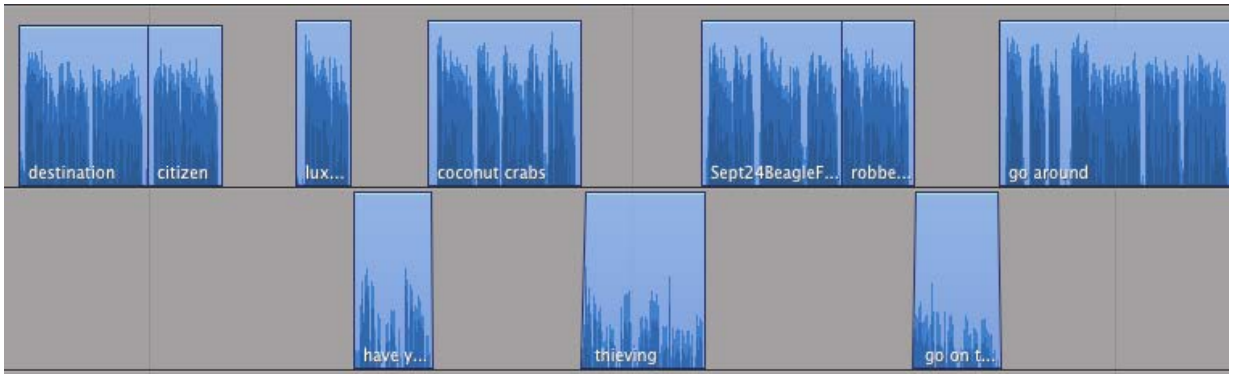

Fig 5: Audio selects in Hindenburg

To create "Island of Migrants," I created several draft scripts with written narration and textual selects, adjusting this script based on the sound of the clips as well as adjustments to story structure. Text and audio drafts of the story received feedback through various outlets, including a five-minute exhibit at *The Gallery,* a student art exhibit at Stanford University in April 2018,[27] and an audio draft published during Digital Frontiers 2019. The final story, a 19-minute audio epsiode, is published online.[28]

Conclusion

Migrants are systematically silenced. For boat-bound asylum seekers, silence is a result of both long-term imprisonment and embodied violence, including literal representations of an inability to speak like lip sewing. On an island where movement is central not just to belonging but to survival, asylum seekers are cast into yet another outsider role through this force silence and forced stillness. Relying on enthographic and journalistic methods, "Island of Migrants" seeks to reverse the process of othering that is occuring by allowing asylum seekers to speak directly. While an audio podcast cannot restore the movement necessary to survival, it can combat silence by restoring voice.

Acknowledgements

Many many thanks to VPUE, whose Beagle II grant made this entire journey possible. Thanks also to my advisors: Gordon Chang, Jake Warga, and Hilton Obenzinger, who have kept me focused and moving forward both while I was abroad and back on campus. And finally, thanks to the islanders and friends in Melbourne who agreed to speak to me, taught me about history and current life, and welcomed me in.

[27] Behance. "The Gallery: Pop Up Gallery Built in a Dorm Room." Behance. Accessed December 17, 2019. https://www.behance.net/gallery/81914647/the-Gallery-Pop-Up-Gallery-Built-in-a-Dorm-Room.

[28] Niu, Stephanie. "Following the Water." *Following the Water* (blog). Anchor, December 13, 2019. https://anchor.fm/followingthewater/episodes/Island-of-Migrants-e9gsaq/a-a15vv0b.