

**Australia's Asylum Seeker Policy
and Christmas Island**

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ABSTRACT

Debates about asylum seekers who arrive by boat regularly feature in Australia's political and media spheres. Many of these discussions make reference to Christmas Island, an Australian outpost located in the Indian Ocean, where asylum seekers are detained. While most mainland Australians only hear or read about asylum seekers via the media, the people of Christmas Island experience asylum seekers face to face. While Christmas Island is often cited in discussions about Australia's asylum seeker policy, little research has been conducted at the actual site of Christmas Island.

This study seeks to provide insights into how Australia's asylum seeker policy plays out at the Australian border. This research asks: How have Christmas Islanders responded to asylum seekers from 1992 to 2011, and what meaning can be made of these encounters?

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted on Christmas Island from 2008 to 2011, this thesis tells the story of the Christmas Island host community. Islander encounters with asylum seekers produce numerous and paradoxical responses that are best interpreted through the shifting nature of hospitality and are anchored in the various forms of proximity that are geographically shaped by the island's location and the boundaries of detention. Islander responses to asylum seekers can be understood through the island's history of marginalisation, shared experiences with asylum seekers, bearing witness, protest and the border economy that prevail within this island host community.

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To the asylum seekers who are still detained on Christmas Island and offshore, my thoughts are with you. I hope one day that you will find the freedom, peace and hospitality that you so desperately asked of Australia.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma. To the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

This text has been proofread and copy-edited by Neil Conning. The editing detected and corrected errors and inconsistencies in the text including accepted spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage and ensured accuracy and completeness of references. It did not change the substantive content of the thesis.

Michelle Dimasi
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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACM	Australasian Correctional Management
ACS	Australasian Correction Services
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFP	Australian Federal Police
AMSA	Australian Maritime Safety Authority
BPC	British Phosphate Commission
CI	Christmas Island
CIDHS	Christmas Island District High School
CIRAR	Christmas Island Rural Australians for Refugees
CLA	Chinese Literary Association
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
CPA	Comprehensive Plan of Action
CRG	Community Reference Group
DIAC	Department for Immigration and Citizenship
DIMIA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs
DOFA	Department of Finance and Administration
DOTARS	Department of Territories and Regional Services
FESA	Fire and Emergency Services Authority
GSL	Global Solutions Limited
IDAG	Immigration Detention Advisory Group
IDC	Immigration Detention Centre
IOT	Indian Ocean Territories
IOTHS	Indian Ocean Territories Health Services
IRPC	Immigration Reception Processing Centre
JSC	Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Boat Crash
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
NTR	Never to return
NWP	North West Point
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RAR	Rural Australians for Refugees
RCC	Rescue Control Centre
RHIB	Rigid-hulled inflatable boats
SAS	Special Air Service
SES	State Emergency Service
SIEV	Suspected irregular entry vessel
SOCI	Shire of Christmas Island
TPV	Temporary protection visas
UCIW	Union of Christmas Island Workers
UAM	Unaccompanied Minor
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VMR	Voluntary Marine Rescue
WCG	Walter Construction Group

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Encountering Asylum Seekers

In December 2010, Australians watched their television screens as an asylum seeker boat smashed to pieces as it crashed on the rocks of Christmas Island. Media footage not only showed asylum seeker bodies floating in the water, but islanders witnessing the horror first hand. Fifty asylum seekers drowned, 42 survived and one community was broken. I was on Christmas Island at that time. For days after the tragedy, I smelled the diesel from the boat crash. I witnessed friends and family traumatised, some who still vividly recalled the asylum seekers' screams long after the incident. I sat with survivors in the detention centre and comforted them while listening to their stories of pain and loss.

Debates about asylum seekers who arrive by boat regularly feature in Australia's political and media spheres. Australians often have opinions about 'boat people' that range from 'send them home' to 'let them stay'. Many of these discussions make reference to Christmas Island, an Australian outpost located in the Indian Ocean, where asylum seekers are detained. While most mainland Australians only hear or read about asylum seekers via the media, the people of Christmas Island experience asylum seekers face-to-face. The story of what happens when Christmas Islanders encounter asylum seekers is largely an untold one, but important, as it provides insight into why humans respond to strangers in need, or why at times they do not.

The central question of this research is: *How* has the Christmas Island community responded to asylum seekers from 1992 until 2011 and *what* meaning can be made of these encounters?

This first chapter lays the foundations for the chapters that follow. An overview of Christmas Island is first provided before situating Christmas Island in relation to Australia's detention policy. I then explain the motivation for the research and identify the field of Christmas Island studies. Concepts of proximity and hospitality in asylum seeker host communities are discussed.

Finally, methodological approaches are explained, along with an overview of the thesis.

Introducing Christmas Island

Situated much closer to Indonesia than Australia, this tropical island is 360 kilometres south of Java, while the nearest Australian city is Perth, located 2,660 kilometres away. Because of its closeness to the asylum seeker transit country of Indonesia, Christmas Island has become a destination for mainly Middle Eastern and Afghan asylum seekers who aspire to be resettled in Australia and granted protection visas. An exceptionally small percentage of millions of displaced people globally make the perilous journey across the Indian Ocean. From 2008 to late 2011, more than 14,000 asylum seekers arrived by boat in Australian waters, with most transiting through Indonesia and subsequently detained on Christmas Island.

While the Christmas Island community has experienced asylum seeker boat arrivals for nearly 20 years, islanders are no strangers to boat journeys themselves, with a number of them migrating from Asia across the Indian Ocean to Christmas Island. The community comprises around 2,000 people, many of whom have strong ethnic ties with China and Malaysia. Originally uninhabited, the island was settled by the British in 1888 after the discovery of phosphate. Singapore was designated as the island's capital. In the early years of the twentieth century, migrants originating from the Straits Settlement and China sailed from Singapore to work in the phosphate mine. Workers from seaside villages migrated from Indonesia and Malaysia for employment at the island's port. In 1948, the Australian and New Zealand governments purchased the mine and sovereignty was transferred to Australia 10 years later. From settlement to the early 1980s, a colonial system operated, with Asian workers paid minimum wages and segregated from European islanders. After the formation of the Union of Christmas Island Workers (UCIW) segregation ceased and Asian islanders were granted the same rights as their European counterparts.

The phosphate mine still operates on Christmas Island and up until 2010 was the largest employer. With the increase in boat arrivals in recent years, the

detention industry replaced the mining industry as the island's main employer. Prior to the detention industry, local unemployment was high, with many islanders struggling to find full-time work. Detention has boosted the local economy. Tourism, on a smaller scale, contributes to the economy. The island's unique natural environment attracts bird watchers, divers and nature enthusiasts from around the world. Visitors come to see the red crab (*Gecarcoidea natalis*) migration, where millions of crabs travel from the jungle to the sea to reproduce.

Christmas Island's small township is heavily influenced by Asian migration. Three sub-communities live side by side: Chinese, Malay and European.¹ Road signs generally use Chinese, Malay and English names: near the local school, for example, are streets called Jalan Guru (Malay for 'teacher's road'), Sin Sang (Chinese for 'teacher's street') and Tutor Close. Three cemeteries mark the existence of three communities. Chinese deceased are buried in a cemetery on one side of the road, the Malay cemetery is located on the other and Europeans are laid to rest close to the ocean. Three main religions – Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – are practised on Christmas Island. The island's humid air is often intensified with the smell of incense drifting from one of the island's many Buddhist temples, while the mosque's call to prayer echoes within close vicinity to the small Catholic church. Buddhism is the predominant religion (16.8%), visible in daily island life with temples dotted around most parts of the island. Most Chinese islanders follow Buddhism, while the second-highest number follow Islam (14.7%).²

In recognition of the different cultural and religious traditions of each community, Christmas Island officially celebrates Chinese New Year and Hari Raya.³ Holidays in Malaysia and Singapore, where most Asian islanders

¹ Most locals and the Christmas Island Shire Council maintain that the island comprises 60% Chinese residents, 20% European and 20% Malay. However, there is no official recording of such statistics. It does not necessarily mean that Chinese, Malay and European citizens reside on the island. Rather it is a cultural affiliation or identification with being Chinese, Malay or European that includes participating in cultural and religious celebrations and languages spoken at home.

² ABS, 'Christmas Island', 2011 Census Quick Stats, accessed 27 August 2014, www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/GL_ABS0006?opendocument&navpos=220.

³ Hari Raya is a three-day Islamic celebration after the month of Ramadan. During this month, Muslims fast from sunset to sunrise.

have migratory links, are also celebrated, as are mainstream Australian public holidays such as Easter, Australia Day and Christmas. While islanders themselves make the distinction between who is Chinese, Malay and European, the island prides itself on multiculturalism, with all three groups often coming together to celebrate one another's holidays.

Christmas Island is a non-self-governing territory administered directly by the Commonwealth. Along with Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Christmas Island belongs to Australia's Indian Ocean Territories (IOTs). There is no state level of government and legislatively the island follows a combination of Western Australian state laws and Commonwealth federal laws set out under the *Territories Law Reform Act 1992*. The Commonwealth is represented on island by the island administrator. Local government consists of the Christmas Island Shire Council (SOC), made up of the shire president, a CEO and seven shire councillors.

Detention policy and Christmas Island

Since 1992, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers has been dictated by its policy of mandatory detention. After receiving bipartisan support, the Keating Labor Government (1991–1996) introduced the policy in 1992. The *Migration Reform Act 1992* allowed for the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, introducing the term 'unlawful non-citizen' to describe anyone who arrives in Australia without a valid visa. In 1998, detention services were privatised. From 1998 to 2003, Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) held the detention services contract. In 2004, ACM was replaced by Global Solutions Limited (GSL), which was contracted until 2009.⁴ In 2009, Serco won a five-year contract to manage Australia's detention services. The primary business of these companies is the operation of prisons internationally.⁵

Arrangements on Christmas Island have evolved over time. Since 1992, islanders have witnessed the detention of asylum seekers when the island first received Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat arrivals. Detention arrangements were initially localised, with the island's sports hall functioning as a reception

⁴ GSL's name was later changed to G4S during its operation on Christmas Island.

⁵ Amy Nethery, 'Immigration Detention in Australia', PhD thesis, Deakin University, 2010, 21.

centre on an ad hoc basis. Security was minimal, with only three to four local police officers based there. Islanders made contact with the asylum seekers, bringing them food, blankets and toys. Locals interviewed the asylum seekers with oversight from several immigration officers who had flown to the island.

After the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese were returned to China, this localised approach to detention continued. From 1997 to 2001, Christmas Island received asylum seekers who had fled Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. In response to the introduction of temporary protection visas (TPVs) by the Howard Liberal Government (1996–2007) in 1999, asylum seeker arrivals increased. Under the TPV policy, asylum seekers had no rights to family reunification, and consequently more family groups arrived by boat, shifting the balance away from single adult males who planned to sponsor their families to Australia in the future.

Christmas Island rose to national and international prominence during what is known as the Tampa affair. The Howard Government prevented 438 mainly Afghan asylum seekers who had been rescued by the Norwegian ship *MV Tampa* from disembarking at the island's port. Islanders witnessed the government's militarised response as it sent Australian Special Air Service (SAS) troops to take control of the vessel. In the midst of the Tampa affair, the 'Pacific Solution' was born: all asylum seekers, including those on board the *MV Tampa*, would be transferred to offshore detention centres on the Pacific islands of Nauru and Manus Island. Legislation was enacted to excise Australian islands, including Christmas Island, from the migration zone and exclude asylum seekers from applying for protection in Australia.

The Tampa affair was followed by the 2001 election, which was held in the shadow of September 11 attacks in the United States. John Howard's election campaign primarily focused on border protection, with asylum seekers depicted as the enemy.⁶ As Crock, Saul and Dastyari point out: 'Australian politicians were quick to draw links between the incursions of boat people and

⁶ Peter Fox, 'International asylum and boat people: The Tampa Affair and Australia's "Pacific Solution"', *Maryland Journal of International Law* 25, no. 1 (2010): 363–4.

the prospect of terrorist attack.⁷ Asylum seeker boats were interdicted and forced back to Indonesia by the Australian Navy and Coastguard under what was known as Operation Relex, which Chambers sees as ‘the first full-blown application of the border security paradigm in Australia’.⁸ Two significant events occurred in the lead-up to the election. The first was the sinking of SIEV X, whose 353 asylum seekers drowned en route to Australia in the Sunda Strait, Indonesia.⁹ The second was the ‘children overboard’ incident, in which the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock falsely claimed that asylum seekers attempted to throw their children into the ocean after the navy instructed the boat to return to Indonesia.

The demonisation of asylum seekers became common practice in political debates leading up to the 2001 election.¹⁰ Howard announced to the public: ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’.¹¹ This struck a chord with many Australians.¹² The Howard Government won the election and, with much public support, stopped the boats by 2002.¹³ However, some Australians disagreed with the Howard Government’s policies, and a robust refugee advocacy movement was born in Australia.¹⁴ Refugee advocates made contact with asylum seekers in remote locations, protested and wrote to detainees. Unlike islanders, most advocates did not live close to the detention centres; none of them were in a position to encounter asylum seekers in everyday life or witness to the realities of Australia’s asylum seeker policy.

⁷ Mary Crock, Ben Saul and Azadeh Dastyari, *Future Seekers II: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia* (Leichhardt: Federation Press, 2006): 5–6.

⁸ Peter Chambers, ‘Shipwreck with spectator: snapshots of border security in Australia’, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 26, no. 1 (2014): 103.

⁹ SIEV stands for Suspected Irregular Entry Vessel and is a term used by Australian government agencies when referring to unauthorised boats entering Australian waters.

¹⁰ David Corlett, ‘Politics, symbolism and the asylum seeker issue’, *UNSW Law Journal* 23, no. 3 (2000): 13–32.

¹¹ John Howard, Election Speech, Sydney, 28 October 2001, accessed 23 July 2014, <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard>.

¹² Robert Manne, ‘Reflections on the Tampa “crisis”’, *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy*, 5, no.1 (2002): 36.

¹³ Katharine Betts, ‘Boatpeople and public opinion in Australia’, *People and Place* 9, no. 4 (2001): 34–48.

¹⁴ Margot O’Neill, *Blind Conscience* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008); Diane Gosden, ‘What if no one had spoken out against this policy?: The rise of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy in Australia’, *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 1–21.

Islanders have had direct contact with asylum seekers held in immigration detention. As in mainland detention centres, asylum seekers on the island who arrived during the Howard Government's period in office were incarcerated for many years. Suffering was widespread, with attempted suicides, hunger strikes and acts of self-harm occurring. Some detainees suffered abuse at the hands of the guards and inadequate access to medical services.¹⁵ Some islanders who worked at the detention centre or were refugee advocates witnessed these injustices. Asylum seekers were also held in remote locations such as Woomera detention centre, in South Australia's desert. This out-of-sight, out-of-mind approach reached new heights in 2002, when the government announced the construction of a \$500 million maximum-security detention prison on Christmas Island called North West Point (NWP). For six years islanders observed the construction of this 'super-max' prison, which has an 800-person capacity, complete with electric fences, microwave sensors and lock-down areas.¹⁶

In November 2007, a Labor government came to power with Kevin Rudd as prime minister. Changes to Australia's asylum seeker policy signified a more humane approach. Immigration Minister Chris Evans moved quickly to dismantle the Pacific Solution by closing the detention facilities on Nauru and brought remaining offshore detainees to the Australian mainland. The Howard Government's legacy of TPVs was abolished. The policy of excision remained in place and all future boat arrivals were to be processed and detained on Christmas Island. The government announced a set of Detention Values, which specified that detention was only to be used as a last resort and for the shortest practical period.¹⁷

During the Rudd Government's first year in power, Christmas Island detention facilities lay empty and it seemed unlikely boats would arrive again. The Rudd Government inherited NWP, which was ready to open its doors by mid-2008. The only asylum seekers on the island at this time were a West

¹⁵ Linda Briskman, Susie Latham and Chris Goddard, *Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia* (Carlton North: Scribe, 2008).

¹⁶ This 800 capacity was later exceeded and doubled by 2011.

¹⁷ Chris Evans, 'New directions in detention: Restoring integrity to Australia's immigration system', Speech delivered to Centre for International and Public Law, Australian National University, 29 July 2008.

Timorese family of four who lived among locals in community detention. No one on the island, myself included, thought NWP would ever be used.¹⁸

However, in late September 2008 the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy was put to the test. Fourteen asylum seekers were intercepted by Australian Customs and Border Protection and brought to Christmas Island. NWP remained unopened as small numbers of asylum seekers continued to arrive. Adult males were accommodated at Phosphate Hill Immigration Detention Centre, a 130-person capacity facility close to the township on Vagabond Road built in 2001. Previously used to house NWP construction workers, Construction Camp was designated as an 'alternative place of detention (APOD)'. In 2005, Australia adopted a policy of no children in detention centres. Construction Camp, a minimal security facility with a 310-person capacity, accommodated unaccompanied minors, families and single adult females. By 31 December 2008, 161 asylum seekers had come to the island. In response, the Immigration Department opened NWP. Adult men were accommodated there while families remained at Construction Camp.

Over the next few years, the detention industry continued to grow on Christmas Island, provoking mixed responses in the local community. Some islanders were happy to see the local economy boom, while others were unimpressed by the influx of detention workers. No longer was the island a quiet place where everyone knew one another. By early 2011, there were almost 2,500 people in detention on the island.¹⁹ Overcrowding of detention facilities resulted in the erection of accommodation tents (known as marquees) to deal with the surge in boat arrivals. The Immigration Department struggled to keep up with the increasing number of asylum seekers, which meant there were significant delays in the processing of asylum claims. In March 2011, the issue reached a critical point when detainees protested, rioted and in some cases escaped. The Australian Federal Police responded with tear gas and took control of NWP, and islanders expressed great concern about the impact asylum seekers were having on the local community.

¹⁸ Michelle Dimasi, 'Compassion and \$400 million thrown out to sea', *Canberra Times*, 23 May 2008.

¹⁹ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 11 March 2011.

Impetus for the research

In mid-2005 during my university holidays, I visited my mother, who was living on Christmas Island. While on the island, I went to Jack's Hill on the north-west side of the island. Standing on the hill, I observed NWP. It was a perplexing experience to pass through the sleepy township and the lush jungle and come upon this massive detention centre. Its sheer size raised questions about how the local community was reacting to the centre. It also triggered my own interest in asylum seekers.

At the local video store, a collection of photographs displayed on top of the shelves caught my eye. Some were of decrepit boats sailing into Christmas Island's Flying Fish Cove packed with asylum seekers. One photo featured a local Customs officer wading through the water carrying a baby to shore. There were photographs of the Tampa affair, with the MV *Tampa* drifting off the coast of Christmas Island, the international media stationed at Flying Fish Cove, and of islanders protesting against the government's refusal to let the *Tampa*'s passengers land.

Returning to the island again in 2007, I conducted research for my honours thesis.²⁰ My ongoing interest in Christmas Island and asylum seekers led me to pursue a doctoral thesis on encounters between islanders and asylum seekers. In August 2008, when I commenced my PhD research, no boats had arrived since the Rudd Labor Government had come to office. My initial aim was to investigate how the local community had responded to boat arrivals from 1992 to 2007. As the field site rapidly evolved, however, I bore witness to asylum seekers arriving on Christmas Island and observed how the local community responded. No longer was the research merely about what had happened in the past but extended up until 2011.

When I commenced the research in 2008, Christmas Island studies were almost non-existent. Most of the literature pertaining to Christmas Island was official government reports. These ranged from reports about governance

²⁰ Michelle Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion', Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 2007. In three instances, I have drawn on interview material for my Honours thesis. Where this has occurred I have referenced it as my Honours project.

arrangements, environmental studies to the future of the island.²¹ Since the Tampa affair, Christmas Island has been primarily discussed from the perspective of playing an important role in Australia's asylum seeker policy. However, little fieldwork has been conducted on the island; nor has much attention been paid to the actual site. However, over the course of writing my thesis the work of two academics emerged – Simone Dennis and Peter Chambers, – yet neither specifically explored the Christmas Island asylum seeker host community.

Dennis's work is located within the discipline of anthropology. Christmas Island's unique natural environment led Dennis to explore how islanders relate to the animal world and the production of movement, sensuality and locality.²² Dennis has discussed islander relations with asylum seekers by analysing metaphors that relate to human–animal relationships used in everyday island life, including when islanders speak about asylum seekers.²³

Chambers' research into Christmas Island focuses on governance arrangements, border security and sovereignty. He puts forth a genealogy of the island's governance arrangements and argues that islands are 'objects of governmental worrying and intervention' and utopic spaces for containment and orderly migration.²⁴ Chambers argues that NWP was politically contrived by the Howard Government to solve the problem of asylum seekers.²⁵ While his work is concerned with the emplacement of NWP on Christmas Island, it does not explore how islanders have responded to those held in detention; nor does it look at local responses to NWP as this thesis sets out to do.

While there have been a number of academic studies into Australia asylum seeker policy, including the use of Christmas Island as a space for detention,

²¹ For example, W.W. Sweetland and Department of Home Affairs and Environment, *Inquiry into the Long-term Future of Christmas Island* (Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1982); Richard Rye and Commonwealth Grants Commission *Report on Christmas Island Inquiry 1995* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995).

²² Simone Dennis, *Christmas Island: An Anthropological Study* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008).

²³ Simone Dennis, 'Of crustacean blood and ant infection: Life in the migration exclusion zone, Christmas Island, Australia', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 20, (2009): 213-228..

²⁴ Peter Chambers, 'Society has been defended: Following the shifting shape of state through Australia's Christmas Island', *International Political Sociology*, 5 (2011): 18.

²⁵ Peter Chambers, 'The passage of authority: Imagining the political transformation of Australia's island, from sovereignty to governance', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 116–137.

there is little literature about islanders who encounter asylum seekers and bear witness to the enactment of asylum seeker policy.²⁶ The most recent work is my own conducted with several other academics who have visited Christmas Island.²⁷

Proximity, hospitality and host communities

From 2008 to 2011, asylum seeker boats became a semi-permanent fixture on the Christmas Island horizon. Islanders observed asylum seekers come ashore, detained and processed, along with witnessing critical events such as detention centre riots and boat tragedies. Encounters between islanders and asylum seekers have produced numerous and contrasting islander responses. Sometimes responses were positive, dominated by acts of solidarity, hospitality and rescue. On other occasions, responses were negative and fearful, particularly when locals perceived asylum seekers as a threat.

Given the spatial nature of how islanders encounter asylum seekers, which is influenced by Christmas Island's geographical location and the boundaries of detention, the concept of proximity provides a starting point to interpret islander responses. As will be discussed in later chapters, this produces discourses about shared experiences, bearing witness and protest. Malone argues, 'All human relationships have spatial aspects. This is true not only because we are material beings with bodies that move and have volume, but because our proximity to or distance from others and from places have meaning to us.'²⁸ It is the effect that proximity has on islander and asylum seeker relations that I seek to understand. Proximity can be framed in three

²⁶ For example, Kate Coddington et al., 'Embodied possibilities, sovereign geographies and island detention: Negotiating the "right to have rights" on Guam, Lampedusa, and Christmas Island', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 27-48; Kate Coddington and Alison Mountz, 'Countering isolation with the use of technology: How asylum seeker detainees on islands in the Indian Ocean use social media to transcend their confinement', *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, 10, no.1 (2014): 97-112; Suvendrini Perera, 'A line in the sea', *Race and Class*, 44, no.2 (2002): 23-29.

²⁷ Linda Briskman, Lucy Fiske and Michelle Dimasi, 'Collateral damage: The impact of Australian asylum seeker policy on Christmas Island (2001-2011)', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 99-115; Michelle Dimasi and Linda Briskman, 'Let them land: Christmas Islander responses to Tampa', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, no. 2 (2010): 199-218; Linda Briskman and Michelle Dimasi, 'Not quite Australia', in *Enter at Own Risk: Australia's Population Questions for the 21st Century*, ed. Suvendrini Perera et al. (Perth: Black Swan Press, 2010): 141-59.

²⁸ Ruth Malone, 'Distal nursing', *Social Science and Medicine* 56, no. 11 (2003): 2317.

different forms: physical, narrative and moral.²⁹ Physical proximity refers to islanders being close to (or far from) asylum seekers; for example, seeing asylum seekers come ashore or encountering them in the island community such as at the supermarket or the church. Narrative proximity relates to hearing the stories of asylum seekers, why they might have sought Australia's protection, or about their struggles in detention. Moral proximity can involve taking responsibility for asylum seekers, such as small acts of kindness to rescue. The physical nature of proximity that precipitated islander responses to asylum seekers progressed into forms of moral and narrative proximity.

Proximity was not only academic but became personal during my time on Christmas Island. In 2008, when boats arrivals increased, I began visiting people in detention and volunteering my time teaching them English and Australian studies. This allowed me to gain insight into who the asylum seekers were, the nature of their plight and how detention operated on Christmas Island. This was not a component of the research but provided context and understanding.

Despite the proximity that host communities have to asylum seekers occurring globally, the field of host community asylum seeker relations remains under-researched, with significant gaps in the literature, particularly in Western contexts. Within the developing world, there has been some research into host community relations.³⁰

Goodall noted the research gap in Western host communities and asylum seeker studies when conducting research into asylum seeker communities in the British city of Stoke on Trent.³¹ She argues that too often academics are quite narrow in their focus, looking at only one aspect such as forced migration, particular regions or countries or legal problems.³² She sought to

²⁹ Malone, 'Distal nursing', 2318–19.

³⁰ For example, see Gina Porter et al., 'Linkages between Livelihood Opportunities and Refugee-Host Relations: Learning from the Experiences of Liberian Camp-based Refugees in Ghana', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21, no.2 (2008): 230–252; Robert Chambers, 'Hidden losers? The impact of rural refugees and refugee programs on poorer hosts', *International Migration Review*, 20, no.2 (1986): 245–263.

³¹ Christine Goodall, 'The coming of the stranger: asylum seekers, trust and hospitality in a British city', *UNHCR Policy and Development and Evaluation Service*, 195, (2010): 1–48.

³² Stephen Castles in Christine Goodall, 'Sanctuary and solidarity: Urban community responses to refugees and asylum seekers in three continents', *UNHCR Policy and Development and Evaluation Service*, 221, (2011): 4.

‘span those boundaries’ by studying host communities and asylum seekers, which my research into the Christmas Island host community has also aimed to do.

There has been a higher volume of research into host communities in British contexts compared to other Western countries. This has eventuated as a result of the British Government’s asylum seeker dispersal policy since 1999.³³ For example, Hubbard conducted research into rural British community responses to asylum seeker accommodation hubs.³⁴ Gibson has focused on the lack of hospitality in the case of British asylum seeker hostels.³⁵ Grillo has investigated community protests in the British seaside town of Saltdean.³⁶

The most significant work conducted into island host communities is Friese’s work into African asylum seekers arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Her work traces the early beginnings of islander hospitality and welcome to asylum seekers that was later replaced by what she terms a “border economy”.³⁷

In the Australian context, despite ongoing public concerns about asylum seekers there has been minimal research into the actual impacts of asylum seekers, particularly in local communities.³⁸ To date, two mainland communities that host asylum seekers have been studied: Woodside (South Australia) and the Inverbrackie APOD, and Port Augusta (South Australia) and Baxter detention centre. Neither of these communities witnessed the arrival of asylum seeker boats. Nor were these centres operating in the same magnitude as Christmas Island. Every et al. concluded that there were concerns in the Woodside community about the negative social and economic impact of Inverbrackie while there were positive responses to the increase in

³³ Every et al., ‘The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities: A South Australian case study’, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48, no.2 (2013):173–196.

³⁴ Phil Hubbard, ‘ “Inappropriate and incongruous”: Opposition to asylum centres in the English countryside’, *Journal of Rural Studies* 21 (2005): 3–17.

³⁵ Sarah Gibson, ‘Accommodating strangers: British hospitality and the asylum hotel debate’, *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 4 (2003): 367–386.

³⁶ Ralph Grillo, ‘ “Saltdean can’t cope”: Protests against asylum-seekers in an English seaside suburb’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, no. 2, (March 2005): 235–260.

³⁷ Heidrun Friese, ‘The limits of hospitality: Political philosophy, undocumented migration and the local arena’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (2010): 323–41

³⁸ Every et al., ‘The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities’, 175.

employment and business.³⁹ Curtis and Mee also studied the Woodside site, where they found that community responses to asylum seekers can be understood through notions of belonging.⁴⁰ Klocker investigated Port Augusta community responses towards asylum seekers in light of the construction of Baxter detention centre. She concluded that discourses about fear, security and criminality dominated local responses.⁴¹

It is within these host communities, including Christmas Island, that proximity leads to acts of hospitality. The physical closeness to boat arrivals resulted in islanders welcoming asylum seeker strangers in some instances, while at other times rejecting them. Encounters between islanders and asylum seekers can be interpreted through Derrida's theory on hospitality, including the laws and ethics that relate to this complex aporia. For Derrida, hospitality relates to how humans respond to the Other that enters their domains:

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality*.⁴²

Still suggests that hospitality implies 'letting the other in to oneself, to one's space', while it is a 'particular form of the gift that involves *temporary* sharing of space, and sometimes also time, bodies, food and other consumables'.⁴³ Dikec highlights the temporal nature of hospitality, in that the 'experience of offering or receiving hospitality cannot last', thus making the concept more contradictory.⁴⁴ Dikec notes the self-limiting nature of hospitality, in that for it to take place the host needs to be the master of his or her space in which he or she allows the stranger to enter.⁴⁵ For Dikec, hospitality is about 'openings

³⁹ *ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁰ Faith Curtis and Kathleen Mee, 'Welcome to Woodside: Inverbrackie Alternative Place of Detention and performances of belonging in Woodside, South Australia, and Australia', *Australian Geographer*, 43, no.4 (2012): 357–375.

⁴¹ Natascha Klocker, 'Community antagonism towards asylum seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia', *Australian Geographical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2004): 1–17.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2005): 16–17.

⁴³ Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 14.

⁴⁴ Mustafa Dikec, 'Pera peras poros: Longing for spaces of hospitality', *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, no. 1–2 (2002): 230

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 231.

and recognition'. It involves the act of 'giving spaces to the stranger where recognition on both sides is possible'.⁴⁶

Within this temporal sharing of space with the asylum seeker, islanders bear witness to the plight of those who seek asylum. There is little literature about bearing witness in detention centres. Exceptions include Zion, Briskman and Loff's work on the experiences of health professionals.⁴⁷ Fleay and Briskman write of bearing witness to the suffering of asylum seeker men incarcerated in the Curtin detention centre located in the Western Australian desert.⁴⁸ In the media domain, Tait explains that bearing witness 'implies that certain events require being borne witness to because they require some form of public response'.⁴⁹ Furthermore, she argues that bearing witness goes beyond just 'seeing' but to taking 'responsibility'.⁵⁰ Paying particular attention to journalist Nicolas Kristof, who reported on the atrocities taking place in Sudan, Tait sees the role of a journalist as to bear witness, which 'moralizes the inability to act directly to alleviate the suffering one is proximate to'.⁵¹ Islanders regularly bore witness to the impact government policy had on asylum seekers, and publicised the plight of asylum seekers. This resonates with Rapur's discussion on 'citizen witnessing', where ordinary people document what is happening on the ground and disseminate this information publicly, including via the internet.⁵²

Islanders took responsibility and sought ways to alleviate the suffering of asylum seekers that they were proximate to for almost a decade. This reaction can be further appreciated through the literature on nursing and bearing witness. Nurses frequently witness the vulnerability of their patients and seek ways to alleviate their suffering through good care and other support for the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁷ Deborah Zion, Linda Briskman and Bebe Loff, 'Nursing in asylum seeker detention in Australia: Care, rights and witnessing', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 35 (2009): 546–51

⁴⁸ Caroline Fleay and Linda Briskman, 'Hidden men: Bearing witness to mandatory detention in Australia', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2013): 112–29.

⁴⁹ Sue Tait, 'Bearing witness, journalism and moral responsibility', *Media Culture Society* 33, no. 8 (2011): 1221.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Verica Rupar, 'A fresh take on journalism authority', *Pacific Journalism Review* 19, no. 2 (2013): 243–5.

patient.⁵³ Naef describes bearing witness as ‘a human mode of coexistence. It involves listening to, being present, and staying with while it is an ‘essential human way of relating’.⁵⁴ Drawing extensively on French philosopher Levinas, Naef argues that bearing witness involves a face-to-face encounter with another who is suffering which results in ‘an ethical obligation’.⁵⁵ According to Levinas, it is during this encounter that our own being comes into question, which is the moment where ‘ethics’ begins.⁵⁶ This face-to-face encounter may result in someone taking ‘responsibility’ for the other.⁵⁷ Arman explains that witnessing is bound up in the face-to-face encounter, which ‘awakens a responsibility and a wish to care for him’.⁵⁸

While bearing witness plays a role in islander responses, it needs to be noted that multiple layers of meaning exist when it comes to islander narratives, and making sense of this is not as simple as organising these layers into distinct categories. Islander responses to asylum seekers are intertwined with their responses to government policy that has dictated the past and informs the present. While this thesis focuses primarily on islander encounters with asylum seekers, what became apparent during the research was the existence of tension between islanders and the Australian Government. This tension and the questions it raises about the civil liberties of islanders are beyond the scope of the thesis. However, islander responses to government policy at times shed light on how they responded to asylum seekers. For example, in Chapter Five, which deals with the Tampa affair and excision, and Chapter Eight, which looks at the construction of NWP, islanders did not physically encounter asylum seekers. Rather, they publicly opposed government decisions and policy that would affect asylum seekers. Where these responses to policy provide further insight into local responses to asylum seekers, I have explored these further.

⁵³ Maria Arman, ‘Bearing witness: An existential position in caring’, *Contemporary Nurse* 27 (2007): 84–93.

⁵⁴ Rahel Naef, ‘Bearing witness: A moral way of engaging in the nurse–person relationship’, *Nursing Philosophy* 7 (2006): 147.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43.

⁵⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 107.

⁵⁸ Arman, ‘Bearing witness’, 87.

This thesis tracks islander responses from 1992 to 2011. It gauges how islander responses shifted over time while capturing specific events and government policy that were relevant to that time period. Some of these events preceded my arrival, while others I witnessed first hand. Analysis across a time span not only illustrates the unbounded nature of Christmas Islander responses but also demonstrates how proximity is shaped and reshaped over different periods.

Methodology

The research is primarily concerned with *how* islanders have responded to asylum seekers and *what* meaning arises as a result of these encounters. The reflections of anthropologist Clifford Geertz are pertinent in this context:

To form my accounts of change, in my towns, my profession, my world, and myself, call thus not for plotted narrative, measurement, reminiscence, structural progression, and certainly not for graphs ... It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go.⁵⁹

To ‘produce a sense of how things go’ on Christmas Island, I drew on an ethnographic approach to give voice to islander narratives, which informs my conceptual understanding and analysis of how they respond to asylum seekers. Ethnographic research takes place when ‘the researcher immerses her/himself in the culture/group they are discovering in an attempt to understand the members of the group’.⁶⁰ In this respect, I submerged myself into the Christmas Island community, to gain an ‘insider’ or ‘emic perspective’.⁶¹ May states that ethnography results in an ‘empathic understanding of a social scene’ which gradually breaks down ‘the preconceptions that researchers may have and expose themselves to new

⁵⁹ Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 3.

⁶⁰ Tim Rowse, ‘Aboriginal Australians’, *Sociology: Place, Time and Division*, ed. Peter Beilharz et al. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006): 362.

⁶¹ Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edn (California: Sage Publications, 2002): 267–8.

social milieu that demand their engagement and understanding'.⁶² Jessor explains that ethnography and qualitative methods are not concerned with a single method but utilise a variety of approaches that are all concerned with 'the interpretation of meaning and with understanding the point of view' of those being studied.⁶³ Shaw, an anthropologist who draws extensively on ethnography to inform her research in Sierra Leone, provides a comprehensive summary of ethnographic methodology:

In ethnographic research, which typically consists of a combination of participant observation and informal ethnographic interviews, anthropologists and others seek to understand particular processes, events, ideas and practices in an informant's own terms rather than ours. This entails building up relationships rather than making a single visit, and spending time in ordinary conversation and interaction, preferably before introducing the more directed form of an interview. When we listen to people on their own terms by developing relationships and by observing and participating in events, the answers we receive are often more revealing than those that people give in an interview ... What we learn through ethnography thus has more potential to challenge our assumptions, often forcing us to unlearn as much as we learn. It is this that makes ethnography such a powerful tool for challenging received wisdom and for understanding events and processes on the ground.⁶⁴

Andersson explains that when interpreting what happens at the border, particularly the production of 'illegality' of asylum seekers, 'ethnography has much to contribute', especially when questioning the parameters of the emerging border regime.⁶⁵ He notes the nascent use of ethnographic research at the border focuses on 'the production of illegality as a sociopolitical condition' and 'embodied experiences of border controls'.⁶⁶ While these issues may be specific to those caught in the asylum-detention nexus, ethnography can also be drawn on when exploring how islanders respond and bear witness

⁶² Tim May, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 4th edn (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2011): 166.

⁶³ Richard Jessor, 'Ethnographic methods in contemporary perspective', in *Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry*, ed. Richard Jessor et al. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996): 5–7.

⁶⁴ Rosalind Shaw, 'Memory frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no.2 (2007): 188.

⁶⁵ Ruben Andersson, 'Hunter and prey: Patrolling clandestine migration in the Euro-African borderlands', *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 121.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

to asylum seekers who are ‘othered’ through their ‘illegality’ at the Christmas Island border, and the consequent impact it has on islanders.

Jessor argues that the social science disciplines entered crisis mode in terms of ‘agonizing self-appraisals about the impoverished state of scientific accomplishment, worries about the shallowness or surface quality of the usual findings; and apprehension about the failure of research findings to cumulate or tell a story’.⁶⁷ For example, the social sciences have come under criticism for their failure to acknowledge human subjectivity and pay attention to the role of behaviour in social life.⁶⁸ Jessor notes that ethnography has been given ‘limited respect’ and criticised for not having the same scientific objective status as quantitative research. However, in light of these ‘crises’, he states that there has been a renewed interest in ethnographic methods, given that these actually speak to the issues that challenge the social sciences. As he notes, ethnographers concern themselves with ‘extensive, naturalistic description of settings and contexts, with interpreting the meaning of social behaviour and interaction, with understanding the perspective of the action, the subjectivity of the Other, and with being able to narrate a coherent “story” of social life.’⁶⁹

To overcome some of the criticisms that have faced ethnography, rigorous research methods and establishing ‘trustworthiness’ are core to an ethnographer’s approach. What does this mean in practice? As Lincoln and Guba state:

How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of. What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue?⁷⁰

Achieving ‘credibility’ is fundamental when tackling the above questions. Lincoln and Guba state there are three activities that increase the probability

⁶⁷ Jessor, ‘Ethnographic methods’, 4.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁰ Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (California: Sage Publications, 1985), 290.

of credibility: ‘prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation’.⁷¹

Prolonged engagement

Prolonged engagement refers to spending ‘sufficient time’ to learn the ‘culture’, ‘build trust’ and ‘detect and take account of distortions that might creep into the data’.⁷² Manning notes that prolonged engagement can be assessed ‘by judging whether the researcher has interacted closely with the participants for a sufficient period of time to build an understanding of their perspectives, ways of life, and culture’.⁷³ To ensure prolonged engagement with the Christmas Island field site, my time there spanned three years, from 2008 to 2011. Engagement with the field did not commence until ethics clearance had been obtained from the Swinburne Research Ethics Committee.⁷⁴

Persistent observation

While prolonged engagement is about the researcher being open to the possibilities that come about from inquiry, persistent observation has the purpose of honing in and working out what is ‘most relevant to the problem issue being pursued and focusing them in detail’.⁷⁵ Manning explains that persistent observation provides ‘the study with depth and requires the researcher to expend the effort necessary to discover the important issues in the research context’.⁷⁶ Overall, persistent observation gives ‘depth’ while prolonged engagement provides ‘scope’.⁷⁷

Triangulation

Patton explains that there are three kinds of qualitative data: interviews, observations and documents, all of which were employed during the

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 301.

⁷² *ibid.*, 301–3.

⁷³ Kathleen Manning, ‘Authenticity in constructivist inquiry: Methodological considerations without prescription’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (1997): 102.

⁷⁴ SUHREC Project 0708/181 ‘Christmas Island and Australia’s Asylum Seeker Policy’. See, Appendix 2.

⁷⁵ Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 304.

⁷⁶ Manning, ‘Authenticity in constructivist inquiry’, 103.

⁷⁷ Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 304.

research.⁷⁸ Triangulation took shape through a multi-method qualitative approach when exploring Christmas Islander encounters with asylum seekers. Denzin explains that triangulation is a 'plan of action' that will assist researchers from forming their 'personal biases that stem from single methodologies'.⁷⁹ He notes, 'By combining methods and investigators in the same study, observers can partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from one investigator or one method.'⁸⁰

Interviews

A substantial component of my research was informed by interviews conducted with islanders who held resident status. A total of 42 islanders were interviewed. The Shire of Christmas Island and the UCIW were starting points for recruiting respondents. UCIW and shire staff members became 'key informants' and provided me with contacts in the community, sometimes even initiating meetings.⁸¹ Lincoln and Guba explain that informants are useful when they are 'legitimate, committed, and accepted member within the local context'.⁸² In the early stages of the fieldwork, the UCIW called a meeting at their office so I could meet potential informants. There, I gave an overview of the research project and was able to make contact with shire councillors, religious leaders in both the Islamic and Christian communities, members of the UCIW and women's group leaders. At the meeting, these community members opted in to be part of the study or suggested other potential participants to contact.

'Snowball sampling' or 'respondent-driven sampling' was one method employed for recruiting interviewees. Salganik and Heckathorn explain this as participants being selected through 'friendship networks'. The researcher begins by selecting a 'small number of seeds who are the first people to participate in the study'. From here, 'this process of existing sample members recruiting future sample members continues until the desired sample size is

⁷⁸ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4.

⁷⁹ Norman Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009): 300.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 236.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 321.

⁸² Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 258.

reached’.⁸³ I used my own social networks to find ‘seeds’. Having family members on island enhanced my ability to gain access to community members.

Participants were recruited through my involvement with community events. For example, a few months after my arrival, the island held a celebration for Christmas Island’s 50 years of Australian sovereignty. The shire council wished to publish historical documents about the transfer of sovereignty in the local newspaper, the *Islander*, and I voluntarily assisted in sourcing relevant documents. Participating in events such as this provided me with opportunities to meet potential interviewees. It enabled me to gain islanders’ trust and better access to the community. Furthermore, it also allowed me to give back to the community.

The annual SIEV X memorial service, which acknowledges the 353 asylum seekers who drowned in 2001, was a significant opportunity for community involvement. Since 2002, islanders have held a service, where islanders share poems and songs along with writing the names of deceased asylum seekers on the rocks that surround the memorial. Assisting islanders with the memorial service preparations provided an opportunity to meet those with a particular empathy for asylum seekers.

After surveying media reports, I became aware of islanders who had spoken publicly about asylum seekers both positively and negatively. When I attended community meetings I learned which islanders were most outspoken about asylum seekers. Given that these islanders were prepared to speak in public about asylum seekers, I contacted them directly to see if they wished to participate in the research. This proved to be a successful approach in recruiting participants.

When I commenced the research, I already knew of a small but robust advocacy network that existed on Christmas Island. Often when I spoke to islanders about my research they pointed me in the direction of those who had advocated for asylum seekers. However, when it came to approaching these potential participants, I proceeded with caution, knowing that many refugee

⁸³ Mathew Salganik and Douglas Heckathorn, ‘Sampling and estimation in hidden populations using respondent-driven sampling’, *Sociological Methodology* 34 (2004): 196.

advocates have suffered vicarious trauma and burnout. As Surawski, Pedersen and Briskman conclude after investigating stress and coping mechanisms of refugee advocates in Australia, 'Helping traumatised refugees can negatively impact on the advocates' mental and physical health.'⁸⁴ Their research found that advocates had both high levels of stress and vicarious trauma.⁸⁵ With this caution in mind, I approached islander advocates for interviews and, contrary to my expectations, every one of them agreed to participate.

Most interviews were between 45 to 60 minutes long. Before the interview commenced, the project was explained to the participant: verbally and they were provided with a plain language statement. If the participant agreed to being interviewed, 'informed consent' was obtained.⁸⁶ Interviews were semi-structured, with questions being 'normally specified'.⁸⁷ This approach allowed me to 'seek both clarification and elaboration' from the answers participants provided.⁸⁸ An interview schedule can be found in Appendix 1. Interviews began by asking islanders about how they came to be on Christmas Island and what they liked about living about there. This generally created a comfortable space for islanders to talk openly before I moved on to asking them more detailed questions about asylum seekers.

While English was not the first language of Malay and Chinese islanders, all islanders interviewed spoke an adequate level of English. Throughout the thesis, I directly quote islanders, preferring not to use 'sic' when grammatical mistakes occurred.

To establish further trustworthiness, a process, which Lincoln and Guba term 'member checking' was built in to the research methodology.⁸⁹ Islanders who were interviewed were given the opportunity to be provided with a copy of the transcript. Here, they could check over the transcript, provide further clarification or make corrections if required. However, as Manning notes, member checking is not simply about whether the research 'got it right' but is

⁸⁴ Nadya Surawski, Anne Pedersen and Linda Briskman, 'Resisting refugee policy: Stress and coping of refugee advocates', *Australian Community Psychologist* 20, no. 2 (2008): 17.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁶ Adela McMurray, R. Wayne Pace and Don Scott, *Research: A Commonsense Approach* (Southbank: Thomson/Social Science Press, 2004): 21.

⁸⁷ May, *Social Research*, 134.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 236.

about ‘representing those lives, including the contradictory perspectives, in all their complexity’ while being part ‘of the collaborative process of negotiated outcomes that assures that the themes emerging throughout the study arise from the respondents’.⁹⁰

Some islanders wished to have their names mentioned in the thesis while others did not. When an interviewee wished to be identified, I have used his or her full name. In other cases, to preserve anonymity of interviewees, I have given them a first name pseudonym and no family name. It should be pointed out that in the recruitment phase, islanders were informed that while they would remain anonymous in the research, Christmas Island is a small community, and they could still possibly be identifiable. If the participant had concerns about this, I advised against him/her from participating in the study. Confidentiality of participants was always respected throughout fieldwork, particularly during interviews with minimal references being made to what other participants had said and certainly no transmission of names.

Participant observation

Entering the Christmas Island field site was relatively straightforward because of the numerous visits I made to the island from 2005. Gaining access to the community was also not overly complicated and I did not have to negotiate with any ‘gatekeepers’.⁹¹ Participant observation is described by Denzin as ‘a commitment to adopt the perspective of those studied by sharing in their day-to-day experiences’.⁹² As Blumer correctly points out, participant observation ‘signifies the relation which the human observer of human beings cannot escape – having to participate in some fashion in the experience and action of those he observes’.⁹³

During my fieldwork, participant observation took place while I resided in the Settlement where Europeans live (four months), the Kampong, where Malays are based (twelve months) and Poon Saan, a Chinese islander area (twelve months). Through my residency in these neighbourhoods, I was invited to

⁹⁰ Manning, ‘Authenticity in constructivist inquiry’, 102.

⁹¹ May, *Social Research*, 61.

⁹² Denzin, *The Research Act*, 156.

⁹³ Herbert Blumer, Foreword to Severyn Bruyn, *The Human Perspective in Sociology: The Methodology of Participant Observation*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), vi.

many community events such as Buddhist ceremonies, Chinese New Year festivities and Islamic celebrations at the local mosque.

Denzin argues that the participant observer's role 'involves writing personal narratives about how they studied what they studied'.⁹⁴ Pratt explains that 'personal narrative is a conventional component of ethnographies' which plays the 'crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork'.⁹⁵ Participant observers are not simply recording what is happening.⁹⁶ Rather they 'write culture' as they observe, reflect and write about the world they submerge themselves in during fieldwork.⁹⁷

I kept a reflective journal during the fieldwork, and documented hundreds of informal conversations in the local supermarket, the pub, cafes and the beach. I also attended public meetings and made regular observations of the community blackboard at the town centre roundabout, which is a central point for community communication. I have drawn on field notes in my reflective journal throughout the thesis.

Document analysis

Key document sources were held at the National Library of Australia. Here, the transcripts from Margaret Neale and Jan Adams *Christmas Island Oral History Project* are held. Neale and Adams both lived on the island and conducted interviews with islanders during the late 1980s. This resulted in Neale's publication *We were the Christmas Islanders: Reminiscences and Recollections of the People of an Isolated Island, the Australian Territory of Christmas Island, Indian Ocean*.⁹⁸ These transcripts are rich in material, allowing a deeper understanding of what life was like particularly for those indentured labourers

⁹⁴ Denzin, *The Research Act*, 156.

⁹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, 'Fieldwork in common places', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 31–2.

⁹⁶ Denzin, *The Research Act*, 156–7.

⁹⁷ James Clifford and George Marcus, eds, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁹⁸ Margaret Neale, *We were the Christmas Islanders: Reminiscences and Recollections of the People of an Isolated Island, the Australian Territory of Christmas Island, Indian Ocean* (Chapman, ACT: B. Neale), 1988. I am grateful to Neale for allowing me permission to access these transcripts.

who arrived during settlement years. In Chapters One and Two, these transcripts are drawn upon.

As publications about Christmas Island's history are minimal, archival work was conducted to provide further insights into the island's past. Before commencing fieldwork, archival research took place at the National Archives of Australia at both their Canberra and Perth offices.

An analysis of unpublished documents at the UCIW formed part of the research methodology. Here, a library exists, where information about asylum seekers since the late 1990s has been collected. The UCIW archives hold extensive information about community responses to asylum seekers and have not been accessed by any other researchers to date. Documents contained within these archives include:

- Minutes from meetings held between community leaders and the Department of Immigration;
- Community bulletins;
- UCIW media releases;
- Emails circulated between community members relating to asylum seekers;
- Media articles.

Also collected were public documents that were disseminated in the local community. These ranged from:

- Department of Immigration community updates, which published statistics on the detainee population and detention staff on island, answered community concerns about boat arrivals and provided information about specific asylum seekers events such as the 2010 Christmas Island boat tragedy and the March 2011 riots;
- Community notices published by the island administrator;
- Articles published in the local newspaper the *Islander*.

Limitations of methodology

A anticipated limitation to the research methodology was that I had family living on the island and I had spent extensive periods there. Interviewees may

have omitted conveying information on the presumption that I already knew the answer. Bingham and Connors discuss a similar problem they encountered during their extensive periods in Iraq. They note: 'It is not necessary to prove your knowledge to your source, in fact, treating your source as someone who is teaching you about the topic can be useful.'⁹⁹ However, they explain that an interviewee might see the researcher as having a shared experience or knowledge, which might be useful in some circumstances: 'The weakness of this approach is that a lot can be left unsaid ... as the speaker will presume that the other will know what he means.'¹⁰⁰

In order to deal with the challenges of subjectivity, attention must be given to reflexivity. Davies defines reflexivity broadly as 'turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference', and refers to 'the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research'.¹⁰¹ Reflexivity 'expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it', she writes, which is known as 'reactivity'.¹⁰² Throughout the research, I was quite conscious about my role as researcher given that I made a number of trips to the island and had family living there. It raised questions for me such as: Would participants share information with me? Would I distort the research, seeing there may be a perception among community members that I was a local or even now a Christmas Islander? However, this latter conundrum was quickly resolved when I put my 'insider' status to several long-term islanders before I left the field in early 2012. I asked a man who had grown up on the island whether I was now a Christmas Islander given my time on the island. He was quick to tell me that I was clearly not a Christmas Islander. He responded: 'Sorry, I do not mean to be rude, but you are not an islander as you have not lived here for a long time like me.'¹⁰³ On another occasion, I put the same question to a woman who was born on the island in the 1960s. She responded: 'You were

⁹⁹ Molly Bingham and Steve Connors, 'Reporting the story: Thoughts for reporting on violent groups in a turbulent environment', Dyan Mazurana et al. (eds), *Doing Research in Conflict Zones: Experiences from the Field* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 185.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰³ Interview with Eric, Christmas Island, 28 February 2012.

not born here, island born people are real islanders. Islanders are those who grew up here, experienced things together like the colonial years.’¹⁰⁴

Mapping the chapters

Chapter One has provided an overview of the thesis framework.

As Christmas Island was first uninhabited, the second chapter addresses the historical formation of the Christmas Island community and key events. Since settlement in 1888 through to the 1970s, the phosphate mine created a migration flow from Asia to the island. An exploitative working system based on racial discrimination operated for many years. Until the UCIW won equal rights, Asian residents were forcibly repatriated and denied Australian citizenship despite living on the island for many decades. Coming to terms with the community’s historical formation provides insight into islander responses to asylum seekers, particularly given some islanders draw on the island’s past as a platform for discussing asylum seekers.

Chapter Three introduces Christmas Islander encounters with Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese asylum seekers from 1992 to 1999. It describes how boat arrivals first came to Christmas Island, the detention of asylum seekers and islanders’ initial responses. Furthermore, islanders’ experiences of marginalisation are recounted to provide context for understanding their responses to asylum seekers beyond this chapter.

Moving away from the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese asylum seekers, Chapter Four presents the arrival of mainly Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers from 1997 to 2001. During this period, a localised detention approach existed with islanders becoming involved in the reception, processing and welfare of asylum seekers. Friese’s spontaneous acts of hospitality and Jacobsen’s research into host communities, social receptiveness and beliefs about refugees are pertinent to islander responses to asylum seekers.¹⁰⁵

Chapter Five discusses the Tampa affair, a significant moment in Australia’s immigration and asylum seeker history, to which islanders bore witness. Interviews with islanders reveal the impact of the militarisation of Christmas

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Choy Lan Seet, Christmas Island, 29 February 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Friese, ‘The limits of hospitality’; Jacobsen, ‘Factors influencing the policy responses’.

Island. Tanji's 'community of protest' is also applied in light of islanders' responses to the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*.¹⁰⁶

Chapter Six focuses on the aftermath of the Tampa affair from 2001 to 2002. Islanders witnessed a monumental shift in the processing and detention of asylum seekers with the implementation of a highly securitised regime. Detention altered relations between islanders and asylum seekers as it created physical distance between the two groups. A key characteristic of this period was asylum seeker deaths and the chapter explores islander responses to these tragedies in relation to Perera's work on the SIEV X tragedy and Kleist's research into the SIEV X memorial.¹⁰⁷

Chapter Seven explains islander responses to three different groups of asylum seekers – Vietnamese, West Timorese and West Papuan – from 2003 to 2007. With each group, islander responses were varied. Responses were informed by factors that range from witnessing the suffering of asylum seekers, personal relationships and advocacy. Gosden's work on the asylum seeker advocacy movement in Australia is drawn upon.¹⁰⁸

The construction and emplacement of NWP from 2002 to 2008 and the 'border economy' is the subject of Chapter Eight.¹⁰⁹ Islander reactions to this maximum-security detention centre provide further insight into local perceptions of asylum seekers. The construction of NWP and the lack of government consultation with the local community is highlighted. With the change of government in 2007, the shift in Australia's asylum seeker policy and the opening of NWP reveals local concerns about the island's economy and future.

Chapter Nine explores islander responses to asylum seekers who arrived on Christmas Island from 2008 to 2010. The Rudd Government's policy of using

¹⁰⁶ Miyume Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰⁷ Suvendrini Perera, 'They give evidence: Bodies, borders and the disappeared', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2006): 637–56; Olaf Kleist, 'Remembering for refugees in Australia: Political memories and concepts of democracy in refugee advocacy post-Tampa', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2013): 665–83.

¹⁰⁸ Diane Gosden, '“What if no one had spoken out against this policy?” The rise of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy in Australia', *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–21.

¹⁰⁹ Friese, 'Border Economies: Lampedusa'.

detention as a last resort and moving asylum seekers into the Christmas Island community was a feature of this period. A shift in islander relations with asylum seekers, with the sharing of community space and the growth of the border economy became apparent at this time. Drawing on the work of Hubbard, Klocker and Jacobsen, notions of fear, criminality, burden and strain on resources are integrated.¹¹⁰

Chapter Ten focuses on two key incidents that occurred on Christmas Island: the boat crash of 2010 and the riots in 2011. These critical events produced polarised responses to asylum seekers and reveal the changing nature of islander hospitality. Here, shared experiences, Sibley's work on 'boundary maintenance' and moral panic are drawn upon in light of fluctuating islander responses.¹¹¹

The final chapter concludes the thesis. It summarises the fluctuating nature of Christmas Islander responses to asylum seekers from 1992 to 2011 and outlines future possibilities beyond this project.

¹¹⁰ Hubbard, ' "Inappropriate and incongruous": Opposition to asylum centres'; Klocker, 'Community antagonism'; Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses.'

¹¹¹ David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO

Becoming Christmas Island

Beyond the decrepit Christmas Island club, once a no-go zone for Asian islanders is the European cemetery. Among the yellow flame trees (*Peltophorum pterocarpum*) situated at the cemetery's front are the remains of the Christmas Island Phosphate Company (CIPCo) house built for the first island manager, Samuel Vincent. Standing on his front veranda, he had a complete view of Flying Fish Cove. Here in 1899, he might have seen the first 120 Chinese labourers arrive, brought in to establish the phosphate mine. These labourers joined the island's then small population of around 40 people comprising Malay boatmen and Scottish mining engineers.

Christmas Island's history begins with the phosphate mine. Before the mine was established, the island was uninhabited. Those who migrated to Christmas Island in the settlement years did so mainly because of employment with CIPCo. Today, the phosphate mine operates on Christmas Island and is the second-largest employer after the detention centre. Most members of the Chinese and Malay community have a connection with the phosphate mine, whether it is their ancestors who worked for CIPCo or they migrated during the 1960s and 1970s to work for the British Phosphate Commission (BPC).

In order to better understand islander responses towards asylum seekers, an exploration into the formation of the Christmas Island community is necessary, given that islanders often made reference to the community's history as a platform for discussing asylum seekers.

In the first section of the chapter, I examine how the phosphate mining industry led to the settlement of Christmas Island, importing different groups of people for work. Here, I discuss the migration of Europeans, Chinese

labourers and Malays to the island.¹ In the second section, I investigate the island's population fluctuations created by World War Two: Japanese occupation and post-world war labour shortages are factors contributing to these population changes. In the third section, I address the challenges islanders faced with development of a permanent local population. I examine the limitations on Australian citizenship; compulsory repatriation; and the introduction of limited-term contracts; and the resettlement scheme. The fourth section of the chapter addresses the formation of the Union of Christmas Island Workers (UCIW) and the islanders' fight for equality and wage parity. Finally, I explore how the phosphate mine has evolved since the 1990s and the uncertainty facing Christmas Island's economy. Throughout the chapter, I draw significantly on historian John Hunt's work, given there is little literature pertaining to Christmas Island's history. Hunt's research is the most extensive to date and is of great value given that he worked as the resettlement officer on the island.

From an uninhabited island to an island community

Christmas Island was given its name after Captain William Mynors and crew of the ship *Royal Mary* sighted the island on 25 December 1643, at the height of the swell season. Large waves combined with the island's rugged coastline made landfall impossible. It was not until 45 years later that the first recorded visit took place in March 1688 by explorer William Dampier, who documented his encounter with the island:

It was deep water about the island, and there was no anchoring; but we sent two canoes ashore, one of them with the carpenters, to cut a tree to make another pump; the other canoe went to search for fresh water, and found a fine small brook near the south-west point of the island, but there the sea fell on the shore so high they could not get it off. At noon both of the canoes returned on board, and the carpenters brought aboard a good tree; the other canoe brought aboard as many boobies and man-of-war birds as sufficed all the ship's company when they were boiled. They got also a sort of land animal, somewhat resembling a large crawfish without its great claws. The island is a good height,

¹ Sometimes the words 'indentured labourers' and 'migrants' are used interchangeably. While most of the Chinese came on temporary contracts, many of them never left the island.

with steep cliffs against the south and south-west, and a sandy bay on the north side, but with very deep water steep to the shore.²

Dampier's record suggests that the island was difficult to access, though still suitable for human settlement thanks to plentiful food sources such as birds and crabs, fresh water and timber. However, for the next 200 years the island remained uninhabited with little interaction from the outside world.³ The only visitors to Christmas Island were settlers on Cocos Islands located 1,600 kilometres away. Cocos Islands were settled by the Clunies Ross family, Scottish settlers in 1826. Over the years, Cocos Islands settlers intermittently travelled to Christmas Island to catch birds and collect timber.⁴ These intermittent trips later became of importance when George Clunies Ross made a case to the British Government for the right to lease Christmas Island to establish plantations.

In 1887, extensive exploration of Christmas Island took place by those on board the British ship HMS *Egeria*. Rock specimens were collected and taken to Britain where Scottish scientist Dr (later Sir) John Murray discovered high levels of phosphate. Murray urged the United Kingdom to annex the island in hope that he would be granted leasing rights over the island for mining. In 1888, the United Kingdom followed Murray's advice. Singapore, which was part of the British colony, was designated as the island's capital. *The London Times* published a small article on the annexation:

We learn by letters from Singapore that Capt. May, of her Majesty's ship *Impérieuse*, after leaving Mauritius, opened the sealed orders with which he was intrusted by the Admiralty, and found that he was authorized to annex a small island known as Christmas Island, latitude 11° south, longitude 106° east. The British flag was accordingly hoisted about 11 o'clock on the morning of June 6. A board announcing the fact was afterward nailed against a tree and a tin case containing documents was also deposited. The island contains

² William Dampier, *Dampier's Voyages*, Volume I, London, 1829, 472, cited in Charles W. Andrews, 'A description of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)', *Geographical Journal* 13, no. 1 (1899): 17.

³ John Hunt, *Suffering through Strength: The Men who Made Christmas Island* (Canberra: John Hunt, 2011), 3.

⁴ *ibid.*, 3.

valuable guano, but the anchorage is bad, as there are 50 fathoms of water close in shore.⁵

Unfortunately for Murray, his intention to mine Christmas Island came to a halt when George Clunies Ross claimed leasing rights over Christmas Island. He maintained that his family had occupied the land for some time, planting experimental crops.⁶ Hunt notes, 'Ross believed that something valuable had provoked the British interest – perhaps there was gold?'⁷ The British Government granted Clunies Ross the rights to lease the land for growing coconuts and other crops.⁸ It was not until 1891, when Murray showed Clunies Ross phosphate samples that a joint 99-year lease agreement was reached between the two parties leading to the establishment of CIPCo.⁹

Under the direction of Murray, Charles Andrews, a British scientist visited the island in 1897 to complete a natural historical study before mining began.¹⁰ Two years after his visit, Andrews published 'A description of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)' in the *Geographical Journal*. He included a paragraph titled 'Inhabitants':

For some years Mr Andrew Ross, brother of Mr George Ross, the owner of Keeling-Cocos Islands, has been settled in Flying Fish Cove with his family and a few men from Cocos. During his stay some substantial houses have been built, wells sunk, and fruit trees and coconut palms planted ... Recently a number of indentured labourers have been imported from Java to make the necessary preparations for working in the valuable deposits of phosphate of lime. When I left the island in May, 1898, the total population was about forty.¹¹

Europeans

Flying Fish Cove became known as the Settlement and was the area where Europeans resided. Hunt points out that the European population for many

⁵ *London Times*, 'Annexation in the Indian Ocean', cited in *New York Times*, 30 July 1888.

⁶ Maslyn Williams and Barrie MacDonald, *The Phosphateers: A History of the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985), 47.

⁷ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 3.

⁸ *ibid.*, 3–4.

⁹ *ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Harold L. Burstyn, 'Science pays off: Sir Murray and the Christmas Island phosphate industry, 1886–1914', *Social Studies of Science* 5, no. 1 (1975): 25.

¹¹ Andrews, 'A description of Christmas Island', 35. It remains unclear if the population of 40 people comprises of both Asian and European residents or he is referring to only Europeans.

years never exceeded more than ‘thirty souls’.¹² By 1901, the island had its first district officer, who was ‘responsible for law and order’ along with an island manager whose job was to oversee mining operations. Hunt describes the CIPCo European staff as ‘bluff, no-nonsense Scottish mining engineers’, with most gaining work through connections with the Murray family.¹³ Europeans were ‘transient residents’ and usually left the island upon completion of a four-year contract.¹⁴ While the Europeans did not settle permanently, the Chinese and Malays did at the start of the twentieth century.

Chinese indentured labourers

In June 1899, Christmas Island’s population increased when 120 Chinese indentured labourers, known as ‘coolies’, arrived to work in the phosphate mine. Chinese labourers were the responsibility of the newly appointed CIPCo island manager, Samuel Vincent. At this time, Singapore was a key entry point for Chinese workers. Vincent contracted Ong Sam Leong to recruit labourers for ‘Kasma Town’, the Chinese transliteration ‘ka-su-ma-su’ means Christmas.¹⁵ Recruitment came from villages in southern China’s Kwangtung (today known as Guangdong) province. Both Cantonese and Hakka lived in Kwangtung’s villages. Kwangtung was over-populated, and ‘emigration was necessary to relieve the pressure upon the society as a whole’.¹⁶ Most Chinese employees were ‘very young’, some as young as 13 as and no older than 17 years.¹⁷ Hunt sums up how the future appeared for prospective young labourers:

This was a dazzling prospect for the young poverty-stricken inhabitants of the villages and paddy fields of Kwangtung. There was little future for them in the place of their birth. The 1890s had seen recurring famine through Southern China, and the incompetence and corruption of the Ch’ing dynasty offered no hope of reform ... Kasma Town would have to be better.¹⁸

¹² Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 16.

¹³ *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 14.



Figure 2.1: Chinese cemetery

Along Gaze Road, heading towards the island's resort (formerly the casino), the roadside is dotted with Chinese gravestones. Helene Bartleson provides information about the indentured labourers through her research on Chinese gravestones. She explains that headstone inscriptions show that for more than 50 years most indentured labourers were from the Chinese province of Guangdong, with lesser numbers from other provinces, including Fujian, Jiangxi, and Hainan Island. Speaking of the workers' origins and the building of a Chinese island community, Bartleson explains:

A significant number of them came from the poor rural areas of south-west Guangdong, known as Sze Yap – the Four Districts of Hoi Ping, Toi Shan, San Wei and Yan Ping. On an isolated island in the absence of family, such common origins would have given the men invaluable support structure based on village and clan links, as well as a common Cantonese dialect, so they could understand each other.¹⁹

Most never saw their homes again. This was partly because of the way they were recruited. Poverty-stricken potential labourers did not have the funds to pay their passage to Christmas Island. Ong Sam Leong offered to pay the passage on the understanding that the labourer would pay back the debt once earning an income on Christmas Island. However, it was not uncommon for

¹⁹ Helene Bartleson, *Golden Leaves: An Introduction to the Chinese Cemeteries of Christmas Island* (Springwood, NSW: Boobook Editions, 2008), 11.

indentured labourers to succumb to gambling and opium addictions while on Christmas Island.²⁰ It was extremely difficult for indentured labourers whose contracts had expired but were still in debt to leave. CIPCo prevented labourers from leaving by instructing passing steamers not to carry passengers.²¹

According to Neale and Adams, who interviewed former indentured labourers, the Chinese were beaten with canes if they did not work; even if they were ill.²² It was not uncommon for *mandors* (Chinese supervisors) to cane workers to make them work harder in order to maximise phosphate profits. Neale and Adams' claim is supported by Hunt, who explains that in 1900 the Straits Settlement Civil Service officer visited the island over concerns that the use of canes was being carried out on labourers despite it being illegal under Straits law.²³

Beriberi disease was another reason why indentured workers never made it back to their homelands. Beriberi – a fatal B1 deficiency disease – was rampant. It was likely that Beriberi among the indentured labourer population was caused by CIPCo exploitation. In order to maximise mining profits, CIPCo supplied nutrient poor food to the indentured workers.²⁴ By 1901, it was questionable if mining would continue due to the dying workforce.²⁵ From January to March 1901, 112 Beriberi deaths occurred. By 10 March 1901, the population was 704.²⁶ The death rate of Beriberi from 1900 to 1904 on Christmas Island was three times that of Singapore, where 'some of the worst slums in South-east Asia were located'. This leads him to conclude that the fatalities caused by Beriberi on Christmas Island were 'in some ways one of the most shameful episodes in British colonial history'.²⁷

The Chinese island community continued to grow throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike the Malay community, the Chinese community was male

²⁰ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 17.

²¹ *ibid.*, 31.

²² Jan Adams and Margaret Neale, *Christmas Island the Early Years 1888 to 1958* (Chapman, ACT: B. Neale, 1993), 32.

²³ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 22.

²⁴ Adams and Neale, *Christmas Island the Early Years*, 18–20.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 25.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 34.

dominated, with only a few men in high-skilled positions being fortunate to bring their wives and children. In 1921, there were 13 Chinese women, 20 children and 658 Chinese men. A decade later, the Chinese population consisted of 25 women, 50 children and 820 men, and by 1941 there were 56 women, 127 children and 992 men.²⁸ Hunt notes that because of the large number of men, it was not until the 1950s that a stable and family-based Chinese community emerged.²⁹

Christmas Island Malays

Chinese labourers were not the only group of migrants to settle on Christmas Island during the early 1990s. In much smaller numbers Malays arrived on Christmas Island. While the term 'Malay' seems to encapsulate this group of migrants, they were not all 'Malay'. Labour was sourced from Ambon and Bawean Island (then Netherlands East Indies) along with 'peninsular Malaya, Java, Sumatra, southern Siam (Thailand), Singapore and Borneo'.³⁰

Hunt's claim about the origins of Malay islanders is supported by Quinn's research.³¹ Previously the island pharmacist for several years, Quinn returned in 2003 for five weeks' fieldwork. Quinn explains she was a well-respected community member with extensive relations with Malays and spoke Bahasa Indonesian. She interviewed 100 Malays in informal settings, often with three generations of family members present. According to Quinn, most Christmas Island Malays came from Java, Ambon, Melaka and Bawean Island.³² Links to these places remain strong today as islanders still return to places such as Melaka and Bawean Island to celebrate Hari Raya Puasa (end of Ramadan festival) annually.³³

From the early twentieth century until today, Kampong Melayu has been home for most Christmas Island Malays. The Malaysian word '*kampong*' means 'village' in English. The Kampong features a small mosque, and houses are built closely together to enable villagers to assist one another in

²⁸ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 144.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 144.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 17.

³¹ Eileen Quinn, 'Cultural Integration of the Muslim Malay Community on Christmas Island', Honours thesis, University of Tasmania, 2003, 7.

³² *ibid.*, 38.

³³ *ibid.*, 39.

daily life. Most Malays were boatmen and 'lived the style of classic Sea Malays' in their coconut thatch-roofed houses built on stilts close to the ocean.³⁴ In 1901, there were 21 Malay men and no women and children. By 1911, one-third of the 30 Malay men were married and three children were present.³⁵ By 1941, 50 Malay men, 25 women and 47 children resided on the island.³⁶

The steady increase of a family-orientated population resulted in the formation of a stable Malay community. Malays were the first to 'put down roots', and 'by the end of the 1930s, people were starting to see themselves as "islanders" rather than transients'.³⁷ Malays enjoyed a better livelihood than the Chinese partly because they dealt directly with the mine and not a labour recruitment agency.³⁸ Another reason, says Hunt, is that the Malays had a similar livelihood as they had back home as *orang luat* (sea people). Opportunities for fishing, visiting the mosque and access to a religious leader all existed on Christmas Island.³⁹ It did not take long for the Kampong to operate like those back in Malaysia and Indonesia, and that the 'common cultural and religious beliefs kept the small community united'.⁴⁰

The formation of a Christmas Island community came to a halt when the island was affected by World War Two and Japanese occupation. Population growth ceased as islanders fled to Indonesia and Australia, while those who stayed behind were taken as prisoners of war.

World War Two

It was not until late 1941 that Christmas Island was affected by World War Two. At this time the island's population was at 1,417 residents, the highest it had been in over 30 years.⁴¹ Demand for phosphate was high at the beginning of the war, with 1939 and 1940 being record years for exports. Japan was the

³⁴ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 45.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, 151.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 118.

³⁸ Adams and Neale, *Christmas Island the Early Years*, 32.

³⁹ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 118.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 151.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 175.

biggest importer, sourcing 89 per cent of the island's phosphate in 1940.⁴² With Japan's military presence expanding through Asia, combined with its need for phosphate, it was predictable that Japan would take an interest in Christmas Island.

Japanese occupation

On Christmas Day in 1941, most of the European women and children were evacuated from the island to Singapore before boarding a boat to Fremantle, Western Australia.⁴³ Tensions were high on Christmas Island when news travelled that Singapore had fallen to Japan in February 1942. Two weeks later, Christmas Island experienced aerial bombardment by the Japanese. Most of the Asian population dispersed into the jungle while 21 European men remained in the Settlement. On 7 May 1942, the Japanese invaded the island and took the European men as prisoners of war. On the day of the invasion, 850 Japanese men came ashore to occupy the island.⁴⁴ This included 100 Japanese civilians brought in as technical staff to operate the phosphate plant.⁴⁵

Hunt explains that the primary purpose for the Japanese occupying the island was to ensure that the Japanese company Taiyo Sangyo maintained its phosphate supplies. However, this was not without problems. As Hunt points out, most of the Asian workforce had taken refuge in the jungle.⁴⁶ Up until November 1942, only a small amount of phosphate was exported. Phosphate was sent to Java on the *Nissei Maru* – a supply ship that regularly travelled between Christmas Island and Surabaya – before being sent on to Japan. On 17 November, an American submarine attacked the *Nissei Maru*, destroying the ship and damaging the island's wharf.⁴⁷

⁴² *ibid.*, 170.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁵ Jack Pettigrew, 'Christmas Island under Japanese occupation', *Australian Territories* 2, no. 1 (January 1962): 46.

⁴⁶ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 184–5.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 193.

In late 1943, 60 per cent of the island's population was imprisoned in Surabaya, Java.⁴⁸ Hunt points out that no reason was given for moving islanders to Java, but it was apparent that the Japanese were losing the war. He also notes that relocation was a voluntary process. Around 500 islanders – Chinese married clerks and tradesmen along with Malay families remained.⁴⁹ 750 Chinese, mostly indentured labourers; some Javanese women; and around 50 men of Indonesian origin went to Surabaya. The European prisoners of war were also relocated to Borneo.

When the Japanese lost the war, they departed Christmas Island on 24 August 1945. The remaining local population, which had run low in food supplies, waited several months for help to arrive, leading Hunt to state: 'The islanders began to think that the outside world had forgotten them.'⁵⁰ It was not until 18 October 1945 that Britain's HMS *Rother* arrived to recover the island.

Post-war migration to Christmas Island

In December 1945, John Rupert Paris, the island manager, prepared a report for CIPCo about the dire state of the island, particularly the mine. In 1946, phosphate was sold to the BPC. However, this was only phosphate held in storage bins.⁵¹ As the mine was in such a state of disarray, recommencing operations was impossible, not to mention the inadequate labour source. No longer did Ong Boon Tat supply the island with indentured labourers. Instead, labour was sourced by CIPCo in Singapore with workers coming on month-by-month contracts.⁵² In May 1946, *The Islander* sailed to Surabaya to collect those Chinese islanders evacuated in 1943, many who were eager to recommence work in the mine. Speaking of these men, Hunt says, 'Their average age when they left was about 35 years, and most of them were single men then. Now quite a few had young Javanese wives ... and some already

⁴⁸ Christmas Island Tourism Association, 'Christmas Island history', accessed 14 February 2010, <http://www.christmas.net.au/history.html>.

⁴⁹ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 194.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 198.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 222.

⁵² *ibid.*, 222.

had children.’⁵³ These family groups settled in a row of houses in the Settlement, which gained the name ‘Java Street’.⁵⁴

Despite the return of Chinese staff, the mine still faced labour shortages. Paris turned to Cocos Islands, which had experienced population growth during the war. It was an airbase for the Allies and was bombed by the Japanese. Island destruction and food shortages from war resulted in Cocos Islanders, or ‘Cocos Malays’ as they were often called, looking abroad to resettle, as the post-war population was unsustainable.⁵⁵ Consequently, some Cocos Malays migrated to Christmas Island in 1948.⁵⁶ However, their transition into Christmas Island life was not without problems. While both Cocos and Christmas Island Malays followed Islam, variations existed in their interpretations of the religion. Tensions between the Cocos Malays and Christmas Malays mounted over religious disputes with Christmas Island’s district officer regarding Cocos Islanders as ‘an alien race’.⁵⁷ According to the district officer, the Cocos Malays were ‘conscious that their habits and customs were not entirely in line with those of the local Malays’. Local Christmas Island Malays attempted to force their rituals on the Cocos Malays, requesting their names be changed to conform to Islam. Writing to Singapore’s colonial secretary in 1950, the district officer requested travel to Cocos to inform future Cocos Islands migrants, ‘Newcomers understand their position exactly before they leave Cocos Island[s]’ and ‘they are expected to conform to the Kathi’s [religious leader] teachings here’.⁵⁸ If Cocos Islanders agreed, they could migrate to Christmas Island.

The district officer noted that tensions between the two groups ‘practically disappeared’ after a few weeks of fighting. Apart from a few Cocos Malay elders, the Cocos Malays accepted ‘tuition in religious rites’.⁵⁹ These events

⁵³ *ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁵ Pauline Bunce, *The Cocos (Keeling) Islands: Australian Atolls in the Indian Ocean* (Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda Press, 1988), 56–7.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 56–9.

⁵⁷ District Officer Christmas Island, ‘Cocos Malays’, 1950, DOXI 96/48, Series NN 1/1, NAA, Perth.

⁵⁸ District Officer Christmas Island to Colonial Secretary Singapore, 14 April 1950. DOXI 96/48, Series NN 1/1, NAA, Perth.

⁵⁹ District Officer Christmas Island, ‘Cocos Malays’, 1950, DOXI 96/48, Series NN 1/1, NAA, Perth.

reveal that a distinct Malay islander community had formed over time, with membership centred on religious practice. The importance of religion among the Malay community continues to be a factor today when considering their responses to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers who followed the same form of Sunni Islam as the Malay islanders were more likely to form local relationships after being welcomed to the local island mosque and invited to participate in religious events.

Australian sovereignty

Australia's first significant involvement with Christmas Island occurred in the post-war period largely because of the damage done to the mine during Japanese occupation. With inadequate funds for mine repairs, CIPCo had little choice but to sell. The Australian and New Zealand governments bought the mine on 31 December 1948. The British Phosphate Commission (BPC), which had operated on Nauru and Ocean Island, was contracted to manage the mine for the two governments. At this point in time, the island population consisted of 1,116 residents.⁶⁰ Ten years after Australia and New Zealand took control of the mine, sovereignty was transferred to Australia on 1 October 1958. Australia pushed for Christmas Island to come under its jurisdiction so it could secure an ongoing phosphate supply.⁶¹ Hunt also says that the leader of the majority party in the pre-independence Singapore Legislative Assembly agreed on the transfer and there was little discussion on the matter in Singapore.⁶² Samuel Lim Ming Chuan who investigated the transfer of Christmas Island explains that Singapore was far too concerned with its own problems such as 'unemployment, chronic housing shortages, and political turmoil arising from students and workers' riots' at that time.⁶³ Meanwhile, to compensate Singapore for the loss in phosphate royalties, the Australian Government 'made an act of grace payment of Malayan \$20 million'.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 234.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 238.

⁶² *ibid.*, 238.

⁶³ Samuel Lim Ming Chuan, 'Christmas Island: Singapore's Possession or Misconception', Honours thesis, National University of Singapore, 1996, 43.

⁶⁴ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 238.

In the lead-up to transfer, islanders appeared uninterested in becoming part of Australia. This was evident when R.H. Scott (from the Office of the Commissioner-General for the UK in Singapore) commented:

As regards the transfer in principle, so far as I could tell there is no great feeling about it one way or another, and no one even remotely hinted that anyone thought the Islanders should have been consulted. No one seems to feel any particular reason for gratitude to Singapore, which has done little either for the government employees seconded for service there or for the labourers recruited in Singapore to work in what was after all another part of the Colony of Singapore.⁶⁵

The island's Chinese and Malay community had few ties with Singapore given that they did not migrate from there; hence their disinterest in the transfer. Australia's Minister of External Affairs, R.G. Casey, told the House of Representatives, 'There is no geographical or racial link between Singapore and Christmas Island.'⁶⁶

It was clear that a permanent population had developed on the island. This is well captured in Scott's letter to Alan Lennox-Boyd a few months before the transfer of sovereignty:

There is a small but growing number of permanent residents not indigenous in the ordinary sense of the term. These are workers who have never left the island since they first arrived. In addition, there are on an average about five births a week and some of these will doubtless never leave. Permanent residents of Christmas Island are a new phenomenon and will create new problems for the future.⁶⁷

Scott does not explain why a permanent population might cause future problems. However, by considering the lengths the Australian Government went to prevent a permanent population from developing, such as the introduction of limited-term workers, compulsory repatriation, a resettlement scheme and limitations on the application for Australian citizenship, it becomes apparent that these issues were mostly financially motivated. The

⁶⁵ R.H. Scott to Alan Lennox-Boyd, 4 July 1948, NAA: A1209, 1957/4137.

⁶⁶ Richard Casey, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 4 December 1957, 2845.

⁶⁷ R.H. Scott, Office of the Commissioner-General for the UK in Singapore to Alan Lennox-Boyd (Secretary of State for the Colonies) in London, 1957/4137 PART 4 'Christmas Island – Transfer to Australia', A1209, NAA, Canberra.

reasons behind why a permanent population would go against financial interests are discussed in the following section.

Permanency problems

With the transfer came citizenship rights for island residents. Pursuant to the *Christmas Island Act 1958*, if a person was over 21 years of age when sovereignty was transferred, requests for Australian citizenship were permitted until 1960. The Act was amended on 1 October 1960. Those born on Christmas Island were eligible to apply for citizenship after their twenty-first birthday. However, the prescribed time in which the application was to be made was within two years of turning 21.⁶⁸ This arrangement was explained by the Minister for External Territories W.L. Morrison when he told the House of Representatives:

Under the *Christmas Island Act 1958*, adults who were British Subjects and ordinarily resident on the Island on 1 October 1958 could opt for Australian citizenship within two years of that date. Those who were not 21 years on that date could opt for Australian citizenship on turning 21 years and up to two years thereafter. People born on Christmas Island on or after 1 October 1958 are Australian citizens by birth.⁶⁹

This arrangement was also made possible by section 8(1) of the *Christmas Island Act 1958*. This allowed the non-extension of Commonwealth Acts to Christmas Island such as the *Migration Act 1958* and the *Citizenship Act 1948*, and in later years the *Anti-Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

As the Christmas Island population continued to grow throughout the 1960s, both the Australian Government and the BPC sought ways to limit the formation of a permanent population. In 1964, the BPC's general manager received a letter from the Department of External Affairs. It noted that the Australian Government was 'anxious to limit the numbers of the Asian population which might, because of long residence, be considered by international agencies to have rights of indigenous inhabitants'.⁷⁰ In the 1960s,

⁶⁸ This is set out in section 15 of the *Christmas Island Act 1958*.

⁶⁹ W.L. Morrison, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 12 April 1973, 1440.

⁷⁰ Les Waters, *The Union of Christmas Island Workers* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 14.

many of the men who came in the earlier years who had married after the war and had children were reaching retirement. To prevent them from staying on the island, the BPC introduced a compulsory repatriation scheme in 1965.

Hunt notes:

The BPC did not wish to have them retire on the island and place increased burdens on the infrastructure ... families were sent to Singapore and Malaysia if they had citizenship rights there, and to China if they did not. This policy caused great bitterness.⁷¹

Hunt's claim about the resentment islanders felt over the repatriation scheme was verified by a Chinese islander whose own parents were forced back to Singapore:

In 1965, the BPC started to retire people and send them back to where they came from. Our parents and others, they had no rights, they just had to go back. It was difficult, having left Singapore so long ago, to have to go back again. For all of us it was pretty hard. This happened a lot. Lots of families were rounded up and the same thing happened. It was very, very distressing. Some people even threatened to run into the jungle, and tried to find ways to stay.⁷²

Much of the Australian Government's concerns about a permanent population on Christmas Island related to financial considerations. Maslyn and MacDonald note that in 1968 the Australian and New Zealand governments began considering their 'residual obligations' once mining ceased.⁷³ A 'special fund' was set up to assist resettling long-term Asian islanders both on the mainland and in Asia. For every ton of A-grade shipment of phosphate, a levy of 50 cents was directed into the special fund. Maslyn and MacDonald argue that in order to keep the special fund levy to a minimum, the Australian Government insisted on introducing limited-term working contracts rather than continue resettling Asian islanders. Under this scheme, workers left the island after three years and key personnel had intermittent breaks in Singapore, which prevented them from applying for permanent residency.⁷⁴ Maslyn and MacDonald note:

⁷¹ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 238–9.

⁷² Interview with Huan, Perth, 30 June 2009.

⁷³ Maslyn and MacDonald, *The Phosphateers*, 526.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 526.

In accordance with these policies which were of considerable resentment among the Asian population, long serving employees of the Commissioners were given repatriation incentives on retirement, a family planning campaign was instituted and emphasis given to the recruitment of single men.⁷⁵

The McMahon Government (1971–72) introduced the resettlement scheme, which was implemented in late 1973. This was a government strategy to solve future challenges a permanent population may pose once phosphate was exhausted. This program aimed to gradually depopulate the number of long-term Asian residents. At that point in time, approximately 1,760 long-term islanders resided on the island.⁷⁶ In the lead-up to the resettlement scheme, an inter-departmental committee conducted interviews with local residents in 1973.⁷⁷ J.J. See was responsible for heading up the interviews with 558 islanders and reporting back to the Department of Labour. He concluded:

It is important that those who wish to settle in Australia are assisted to go to areas where climate is suitable and the affects [*sic*] of the transition are not too great. In the case of the Malays especially, it is essential that they are accepted socially. They are used to living in an orderly, happy group, and if they fail to gain acceptance in the locality in to which they are re-settled in Australia they would have permanent social problems. In fact, I doubt whether many of them now appreciate how little they would gain personally by leaving CI and facing up to the difficulties resettlement in Australia will bring, even under the best organized conditions.⁷⁸

Resettlement was made possible by the ‘special fund’ referred to by Maslyn and MacDonald. By 1976, the fund’s balance was \$4.5 million.⁷⁹ Yet, the money had not been released to assist Asian islanders with resettlement. Former island administrator Bill Worth, who was involved in implementing the resettlement scheme offers some explanation as to why it had not eventuated. He says that the BPC had put aside funds for resettling workers

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 526.

⁷⁶ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 239.

⁷⁷ ‘Resettlement of Long Term Residents of Christmas Island’ (Report by Mr J.J. See to CO Department of Labour). 1973/3113 ‘Christmas Island Resettlement’, K38, NAA, Canberra. This committee consisted of representatives from the Departments of External Territories, Labour and Immigration, Australian High Commission in Singapore.

⁷⁸ ‘Resettlement of Long Term Residents of Christmas Island’ (Report by Mr J.J. See to CO Department of Labour). ‘Christmas Island Resettlement’, K38, NAA, Canberra.

⁷⁹ Reg Withers, ‘Parliamentary Debates Australia’, Senate, 9 September 1976, 562.

over the age of 55, yet it was not releasing the funds and using it for capital instead.⁸⁰

Hunt explains it took about two and half years 'before the official scheme, with free fares and cash grants, came into operation'.⁸¹ Asian families were given \$2,800 to leave the island and encouraged to find jobs abroad and permanently resettle in either Asia or Australia. For the scheme to become official, it required the *Christmas Island Act 1958* be amended so resettlement funds were accessible to those leaving the island. After visiting the island, as the Minister for Administrative Services, Senator Withers introduced the Christmas Island Agreement Bill 1976 to the Senate. After meeting with islanders, Withers gave an undertaking that the resettlement scheme would soon be initiated. In his speech to the Senate, Withers explained:

The purpose of this Bill is to honour a longstanding moral obligation of the Commonwealth Government to the long-term Asian residents of the Territory of Christmas Island. Honourable senators will be aware that the only commercial activity on Christmas Island is the extraction and export of rock phosphate ... when that industry ends; there will be no economic future for the island's residents. There are no alternative industries which could reasonably provide them with a livelihood ... It is a matter of simple justice that the Commonwealth Government accepts its obligations to them. This is a government for all Australians, no matter where they may be.⁸²

From 1969 to 1981, over 1,560 Asian residents left the island under the resettlement scheme or on their own accord.⁸³

The 1970s up until the early 1980s was one of the most significant periods of island change. This came about through the establishment of the UCIW. In 1975, UCIW members began their fight with the Australian Government for equality and wage parity.

⁸⁰ William Worth, interviewed by Jan Adams, *The Christmas Island Life Story Oral History Project* (sound recording), National Library Australia, Canberra, 1986.

⁸¹ Hunt, *Suffering through Strength*, 239.

⁸² Withers, 'Parliamentary Debates Australia', 561.

⁸³ W.W. Sweetland and Department of Home Affairs and Environment, *Inquiry into the Long-Term Future of Christmas Island* (Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1982): 18.

The Union of Christmas Island Workers

In the early 1970s, Christmas Island became geopolitically and ideologically closer to mainland Australia. An island airline service began operating between Christmas Island and Perth, Western Australia. Thirty Australian teachers – some with left-wing views and union connections – also arrived.⁸⁴ Experienced in unionism and social justice, school teacher Michael Grimes assisted Asian islanders to form the UCIW. Grimes became the UCIW's first general secretary and Gordon Bennett replaced him in 1979. The UCIW affiliated itself with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which condemned 'the continuing social and economic apartheid practised by BPC and the Australian Government on the Australian Territory Christmas Island'.⁸⁵

Bennett travelled to Canberra to raise concerns over racial inequality and wage parity with senior members of the Fraser Liberal government (1975–1983). Unfortunately, he had little success in convincing the government to change the status quo. Adversarial action was needed, which led to Bennett and five other UCIW members staging a hunger strike outside Parliament House. The strike coincided with Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser attending a conference on the future of Rhodesia–Zimbabwe. Waters comments that the Australian Government would have felt uncomfortable with the public attention created from the hunger strike protesting against racial discrimination while Fraser was publicising his support for black Zimbabweans.⁸⁶ After the strike, the Fraser government negotiated with the UCIW and, in 1979, wage parity for all Asian workers was achieved.

The UCIW not only eradicated racial discrimination but also campaigned for the extension of the Migration Act to Christmas Island. Under existing labour contracts, Asian workers could not apply for permanent residency even if they had lived on the island for more than five years. The extension of the Migration Act in 1981 meant they were now eligible for permanent residency

⁸⁴ Margaret Neale, *We Were the Christmas Islanders: Reminiscences and Recollections of the People of an Isolated Island, the Australian Territory of Christmas Island, Indian Ocean* (Chapman, ACT: B. Neale, 1988), 154.

⁸⁵ Waters, *The Union of Christmas Island Workers*, 138.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 132.

and Australian citizenship on the same terms as mainland Australia. Speaking of this extension in an interview with Michael Zekulich for a publication for the 50 years of Australian sovereignty, former Christmas Island Shire CEO Margaret Robinson said, 'It gave people a sense of permanency which previously they had been denied.'⁸⁷

The extension of the Migration Act cannot be appreciated without reflecting on what became known as the Sweetland Inquiry. In 1980, the Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry took place. One significant recommendation Commissioner Sweetland made was that Commonwealth Acts such as the *Migration Act 1958* and the *Citizenship Act 1948* be extended by ordinance to Christmas Island and that the *Christmas Island Act 1958* be repealed.⁸⁸ As neither of these Acts were extended to the island because of the provision set out under the *Christmas Island Act 1958*, islanders did not have the same right to Australian residency as other foreign nationals in Australia; nor did they have voting rights despite being Australian citizens. The only way one could vote was making an electoral application, which had to be completed on the mainland.

After considering the written submission made by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs for the inquiry, the Sweetland Inquiry reported:

The Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs took a very narrow view of the rights of citizenship and permanent residence of Christmas Island workers. The Department argued, for example, that 'few island workers have close relatives in Australia and they are predominately unskilled.' The Commission of Inquiry questions whether having relatives in Australia is the only yardstick by which extent of a prospective settler's association or identification with Australia can be measured ... The Commission of Inquiry does not accept the suggestion that the Island's workforce is predominately unskilled. It is at a loss to know how the Department could arrive at this view.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Cited in Michael Zekulich, *The Spirit of Christmas Island: Fifty Years Australian 1958–2008* (Perth: Phosphate Resources Limited, 2008), 75.

⁸⁸ Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry, *Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry Report* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980), 7.

⁸⁹ Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry, *Commission of Inquiry*, 93.

It is clear that tensions existed between the Australian Government and the island community. This had come about because of the way the Australian Government treated Christmas Island despite it being part of Australia, combined with the continuing role of the UCIW. These tensions continued to manifest on Christmas Island, particularly when the government announced the closure of the island's mine.

The future of Christmas Island's economy

The Australian Government closed the mine in 1987 and maintained it was uneconomical due to 'increasing wages and a New Zealand decision to halt [phosphate] imports until it cleared its stockpiles'.⁹⁰ Incentives such as redundancy payouts and freight assistance were offered to mine employees to leave Christmas Island. The UCIW urged workers to stay on the island for six months without pay and refuse redundancy. Not only were islanders confronted with unemployment but also with the cost of renting houses.

The UCIW proved to the Australian Government that the mine was economically profitable. It did so by collecting \$300,000 from its members to fund a study conducted by chartered accountant Arthur Anderson on the viability of a future mining industry. The study concluded that the mine was capable of generating earnings of \$US300 million in export dollars over its life.⁹¹

In 1989, the government called for tenders for the reopening of the mine. UCIW workers formed the Phosphate Resources Company and submitted a tender application. More than 350 people, mostly islanders who were members of the UCIW raised \$3,362,000 for company capital with some shareholders contributing up to \$100,000.⁹² Phosphate Resources lost the bid for the new tender to John Booth and his partner Clough Engineering. An agreement was reached, which involved Phosphate Resources Company to have 40 per cent of the mine's share, Clough 51 per cent and Booth the remaining 9 per cent. By 1991, both Booth and Clough sold their shares to Phosphate Resources leading to islanders having total ownership over the

⁹⁰Zekulich, *The Spirit of Christmas Island*, 60.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 62.

⁹² *ibid.*, 64.

mine.⁹³ Robinson explains that this takeover of the mine ‘was the most significant event as an expression of self-determination and will of people to make something happen for themselves’.⁹⁴

The island boomed by the early 1990s with the reopening of the mine in 1992 and the opening of a \$60 million 156-room casino and resort in 1993. As employment prospects were now high, Christmas Island witnessed both newcomers and resettlement scheme returnees come to the island for work. The island population peaked to approximately 3,000 at the height of the casino’s operation. Weekly flights from Indonesia operated bringing with them South-East Asian gamblers. However, with the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, Christmas Island was hard hit and the casino closed its doors. The island came to a standstill, unemployment rose and the island depopulated quickly.

Today, Phosphate Resources still operates on Christmas Island. In 2013 a new mining lease was signed with the Australian Government, which gives the mine a life until 2034. In 2010, the Christmas Island Resort reopened its doors. This was not in response to tourism, but to relieve accommodation shortages for fly-in, fly-out detention centre workers. While many islanders have welcomed the economic growth that the detention centre has provided, the future of the island still remains unclear given that neither phosphate mining nor detention are long-term sustainable industries.

Conclusion

In this chapter, a historical overview about the formation of the Christmas Island community on this once uninhabited island was presented. While the local community expanded over time, it was subjected to a number of population control strategies devised by the government. This involved compulsory repatriation, limited working term contracts and the resettlement scheme. These government initiatives made it difficult for residents to call Christmas Island their home. When reflecting on the island’s history, the ongoing antagonism that has long existed between the local community and

⁹³ *ibid.*, 64. In 2008, Phosphate Resources held over 38 per cent of the shares and 32 per cent were held by island residents.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 75.

the government is evident. This has manifested through the Australian Government's denial of rights to islanders that were long afforded to mainland Australians. The government's treatment of islanders later became an important platform when advocating for the rights of asylum seekers.

Despite the challenges this small island community has faced, it is clear its residents have made a commitment to the island and its people. This has ranged from fighting for equality and wage parity, returning to the island despite resettlement abroad, and pooling their money together to buy the mine back. Islanders have contributed to the building and maintenance of a strong local community.

Christmas Island's history of marginalisation becomes an important factor in the following chapter, which investigates islander encounters with asylum seekers. From 1992 to 1999, Christmas Island witnessed its first wave of boat people who were Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese. Chapter Three makes sense of how islanders responded to these asylum seekers by considering islanders' own personal histories of struggle and mistreatment.

CHAPTER THREE

First Asylum Seekers: 1992 to 1999

From 1992 to 1999, Christmas Island witnessed the arrival of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people. These arrivals marked the beginning of islander encounters with asylum seekers. This chapter explores islanders' responses towards the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people and sheds light on how islanders' experiences of marginalisation and racial discrimination, as outlined in Chapter Two, played a role in their responses to asylum seekers.

Beginning with a general overview about Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat arrivals, the first section of the chapter situates these arrivals in Australia's immigration history. Moving to the local level, boat arrivals on Christmas Island are then discussed. In order to understand islander responses to asylum seekers, it is fundamental to first come to terms with how islanders were subjected to discrimination, which is what the second section of the chapter aims to do. In the third section, drawing on interviews with islanders, I consider how they draw on their own past experiences of marginalisation when responding to boat people. Given the proximity that islanders have had to asylum seekers, the final section looks at how islanders witnessed the boat conditions Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese travelled in. These boat conditions have become part of a local discourse when islanders speak about Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese. The chapter sets the scene for further chapters by highlighting how asylum seekers have historically arrived on Christmas Island, the detention of asylum seekers and local community assistance.

History of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat arrivals

From the late 1970s to the 1980s, Australia's immigration history was characterised by the arrival of Vietnamese boat people fleeing war between the Communist north and south in Vietnam. Australia offered permanent residency to 177,000 Vietnamese refugees who were resettled from South-East Asian refugee camps.¹ However, Christmas Island had not encountered such

¹ Robert Manne and David Corlett, 'Sending them home: Refugees and the new politics of indifference', *Quarterly Essay* 13 (2004): 2.

arrivals. It was not until 1992 when boat people began arriving on this small Australian outpost. These asylum seekers were Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people who made their way to Christmas Island and north-west Australia from 1992 to 1999. According to Schloenhardt, most Chinese journeyed to Australia because of 'generalised violence, civil disorder and conditions of poverty'.² Some Chinese nationals and Vietnamese nationals with Chinese ethnicity (Sino-Vietnamese) were those previously living in the slums of southern China. They became displaced when the Chinese Government cleared ghettos to make way for urban redevelopment.³ They relocated to China during the 1970s and early 1980s under one of the largest resettlement plans ever undertaken by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁴ Sino-Vietnamese boat people also included those who feared being repatriated under the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) that was put in place to deter further migration of asylum seekers who had fled refugee camps in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Galang detention camp in Indonesia.⁵ Under the CPA, asylum seekers were restricted from third-country resettlement.

McMaster explains that the media depicted the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese as 'the Refugee Crisis', with some newspapers featuring headlines such as 'Boat people flood feared' and 'Boat people slip past security'.⁶ Balint also notes that the Chinese arrivals 'unleashed a frenzy of predictions' that centred on 'floods' and 'epidemics' massing on Australia's border.⁷ Some of these concerns emanated from earlier political debate relating to the Cambodian boat people who arrived from 1989 to 1994. Prime Minister Hawke opposed the Cambodians' arrival, claiming that those who jump Australia's orderly

² Andreas Schloenhardt, 'Australia and the boat people: 25 years of unauthorised arrivals', *UNSW Law Journal* 23, no. 3 (2000): 43.

³ Mary Crock, 'The peril of the boat people: Assessing Australia's responses to the phenomenon of border asylum seekers', in *Tomorrow's Law*, ed. Selby Hugh (Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press, 1995), 42.

⁴ HREOC, 'Those Who Have Come Across the Seas: Detention of Unauthorised Arrivals', 11 May 1998, 23.

⁵ Don McMaster, *Asylum Seekers: Australia's Response to Refugees* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 88.

⁶ *ibid.*, 90.

⁷ Ruth Balint, *Troubled Waters: Borders, Boundaries and Possession in the Timor Sea*, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005): 139.

migration 'queue' would not be accepted.⁸ Australia's foreign policy was the genesis for such a stance. At the time, Australia's foreign minister Gareth Evans was actively involved in the Paris Peace Agreements, where negotiations took place to end the conflict in Cambodia that was producing refugees.⁹ For Australia to be seen accepting Cambodian refugees was counterproductive to its role in the Paris Peace Agreements.

The first arrival of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese took place on 23 August 1992 when 68 passengers arrived in Flying Fish Cove. Reuters reported, 'Immigration officials believe the latest arrivals, after stopping in Indonesia to restock their wooden boat, took the short route and deliberately landed on Christmas Island.'¹⁰ When the first boat arrived, the Executive Director of Territories Office Gerard Early happened to be on the island. Early told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'No one could work out precisely what to do with the boat people.'¹¹ It was reported that 'Christmas Island were [sic] in a quandary', as the island 'has no detention facilities, other than two small police cells, just four police to act as customs officials and, if any of the boat people are ill, the island's hospital has only eight beds.'¹² The first boat arrivals were accommodated at the former island school. After staying two nights on Christmas Island, they were transferred to the Port Hedland detention centre in Western Australia. The Christmas Island community learned some three years later what happened to the Chinese boat people when an immigration officer published an article about boat people in the local island newspaper:

68 Chinese persons + 1 baby born after boat's arrival = results – 22 granted refugee status, 26 departures from Australia, 3 granted entry on other grounds, 2 escaped, 16 remaining in detention having been refused refugee status or with application, appeal or litigation pending.¹³

⁸ *ibid.*, 75.

⁹ *ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰ 'Chinese boat people arrive at Australian camp', Reuters, 25 August 1992.

¹¹ Tony Wright, 'Boat people's arrival puts island in quandary', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 1992, 5.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Robert Haynes, 'Boat people', *Islander*, 10 March 1995, 6.

In late October 1992, a second group of Chinese boat people reached the island. The 113 people were housed in the local sports hall, located in the Settlement.¹⁴ According to the Immigration Department, these arrivals were from an area near Guangzhou in southern China and paid approximately \$1,000 each for their boat journey.¹⁵ One member of the Labor government claimed:

It became apparent that these boat people had been the victims of a very unscrupulous racket: they had been tempted and duped into believing that if they made their way to Australia they would achieve a better life for themselves by securing employment, perhaps being able to bring their families out.¹⁶

After eight days on Christmas Island, the 113 Chinese were removed directly to Guangzhou, the airport closest to where they had departed. Immigration Minister, Bolkus told the Senate:

I have no specific information on what has happened to the 113 Chinese nationals since their return to China from Christmas Island. We have ... received repeated high-level assurances that no returnee to China would be persecuted if his or her only action had been illegal departure from China.¹⁷

Some 18 months later, a third Chinese boat with 58 people on board arrived on 28 May 1994. Several days later they were flown to the Port Hedland detention centre. Almost a year later, the local community learned the following information about this group:

58 Chinese persons = results – 19 granted refugee status, 20 departures from Australia, 3 escaped, 16 remaining in detention having been refused refugee status or with application, appeal or litigation pending.¹⁸

In response to the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat arrivals in the early 1990s, the *Islander* reprinted an article published by the *West Australian*. It stated:

¹⁴ 'Chinese boat people land on Christmas Island', Reuters, 31 October 1992.

¹⁵ 'Chinese boat people refused entry into Australia', Reuters, 8 November 1992.

¹⁶ Michael Tate, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, Senate, 9 November 1992, 2474.

¹⁷ Nick Bolkus, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, Senate, 4 May 1993, 62.

¹⁸ Haynes, 'Boat people', 6.

Australia is facing its biggest wave of Asian boat people for more than a decade. Hundreds of illegal immigrants from southern China are expected to arrive within weeks. Refugee workers in Australia predict as many as 20,000 asylum seekers could try to make their way to Australia from China, 10 times the number of Vietnamese who arrived in the last big wave of boat people in the late 1970s.¹⁹

A Chinese boat that arrived in early 1995 was code named by the Immigration Department as the Lorikeet. Those on board were subsequently referred to by islanders and Immigration staff as Lorikeets. The boat's passengers comprised 65 Chinese people who were detained in the sports hall for several months.²⁰ The *Islander* often served as a medium for the Immigration Department to disseminate information locally about the Lorikeets and boat arrivals in general. On 10 March 1995, Robert Haynes, an immigration officer, published a community update. He outlined why boat people were detained and who they were: 'The people have come from a variety of backgrounds including clerical workers and mechanics.' He gave a breakdown of arrivals since 1992 and stated that the Chinese Government had given 'assurances that returning boat people will not be persecuted and not mistreated'.²¹ In the same edition of the *Islander*, Haynes wrote a letter to the editor about the Lorikeets' stay on the island. He claimed that the Lorikeets were 'happy and healthy' and were 'well clothed' and 'well cared for'.²² *Islander* hospitality and the community's general interest in the group stand out in Haynes's letter:

I have been particularly impressed by the generosity of the local population who have inundated us with gifts of clothing, toys, and reading material ... During my time on the Island I am taking the opportunity of meeting as many 'locals' as possible and thank you personally for your donations ... Once again, my many thanks to all those people who have been so kind with your generosity with clothes etc and the interest you have displayed in the boat people.²³

While the Immigration Department was impressed by the community's response to the Lorikeets, the local community was concerned for the asylum

¹⁹ 'West Australian, "Boat people"', published in *Islander*, 2 December 1994, 8.

²⁰ In some instances the number of people in this group is referred to as 66, as a Chinese woman gave birth while being detained on the island.

²¹ Haynes, 'Boat people', 6

²² *ibid.*, 4.

²³ Robert Haynes, 'Letter to the editor', *Islander*, 10 March 1995, 4.

seekers' welfare. The community's discontent over the government's handling of the Lorikeets was publicised on the mainland. For example, the *West Australian* published an article 'Highs, lows of island life', which was republished in the *Islander*. The article wrote of the poor living conditions endured by the Lorikeets. The Union of Christmas Island (UCIW) General Secretary David Scott criticised the Immigration Department and argued that it was a breach of human rights to keep the Lorikeets in the sports hall. He maintained that the department was 'trying to keep the boat people hidden from the public'. He told the *West Australian*:

This time of year, in a tropical climate, it's extremely humid. They've got women and children on mattresses on the floor. You wouldn't have somebody in an Asian prison in the conditions that they're in. It is very old, 35 to 40-year old basketball court. With the humidity up here, it is disgusting to have human beings living in those conditions, especially when the people looking after them are at \$130 to \$170 a night in five-star luxury.²⁴

Other locals joined Scott in his criticisms over the inadequate accommodation for the asylum seekers. The *Islander* reported that at a shire council meeting, in the presence of an immigration officer, the shire 'reaffirmed its view that the sports hall was not an appropriate facility to house people long term'.²⁵ Olivia, who first came to the island in 1979, recalled the accommodation:

Some refugee boats came to Christmas Island and they [Immigration Department] put them in the sports hall and we did the health screening there. It was very warm, very hot in there. The weather is awful ... Everyone is from China. Then the children, what an awful time ... It was horrible in there with all those people. They only had two to three toilets.²⁶

Lillian Oh, the shire president, stated that many locals questioned why the Lorikeets remained in inappropriate accommodation.²⁷ Furthermore, she pointed out that on 7 March 1995 the shire council passed a resolution that it would write to Immigration Minister Nick Bolkus and demand the relocation of the Chinese boat people. She argued:

²⁴ Michael Casey, 'Highs, lows of island life', *West Australian*, republished in *Islander*, 24 March 1995, 5.

²⁵ Geoff Glass, 'Christmas Island Shire Council news', *Islander*, 24 March 1995, 3.

²⁶ Interview with Olivia, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

²⁷ Lillian Oh, 'From the chair', *Islander*, 23 March 1995, 4.

The Department of Immigration has the legal duty and financial resources to manage 'boat' people. The primary obligation is to provide them with suitable accommodation during their detention period in Australia. To date this Council is not satisfied that they have fulfilled their obligation and views it totally inappropriate that the Immigration Department continue to hold the 'boat' people ... The absence of addressing the concerns of this Council is yet another example of a Commonwealth Department taking advantage of the residents of Christmas Island.²⁸

The immigration minister's response to the shire council's letter was published in the *West Australian*, and re-published in the *Islander*. The immigration minister's spokeswoman Ruth Dewsbury responded that the minister was satisfied with the conditions provided for the Chinese boat people. Immigration Department spokesman Stewart Foster said that the Chinese received 'food, medical attention and a volleyball net for recreation'.²⁹ Paul Mabely, a shire council member, argued that the local community was 'deprived of the only sporting facility on the island'. Oh reported community concerns over the 'threat of disease and allergies in the crowded recreation centre', particularly when one of the three pregnant Chinese women had given birth on the island.³⁰ The UCIW appealed to the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission with the hope that they would ensure the Immigration Department upheld international obligations.³¹ Speaking of the inhumane accommodation conditions, Scott told the *West Australian*:

The conditions are unimaginable ... Most of the 66 people, including a newborn baby, are running a fever and have diarrhoea. The shed is mosquito infested, they only have overhead extractor fans, there are only three toilets for 66 people, and outside they only have a portable washbasin like a sink tap. It's the most unhygienic place I have ever seen.³²

Unimpressed by the Immigration Department's lack of concern for the Lorikeets, the shire council responded by raising the sports hall's weekly rent

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Michael Casey, 'Boat people deadline set', *West Australian*, republished in *Islander*, 24 March 1995, 15.

³⁰ Casey, 'Boat people deadline set', 15.

³¹ Norman Aisbett, 'Delay tactics used on boat people: union', *West Australian*, republished in *Islander*, 7 April 1995, 6.

³² *ibid.*

from \$700 to \$20,000. The shire council said that the extra rent money would be used for boat people arriving on Christmas Island. In a letter to the immigration minister, the shire council wrote: 'The continued detention of those people contravenes the Health Act (WA) (Christmas Island) and jeopardises the good health and safety of those people.'³³ The *West Australian* asked Shire President Oh what would happen if the Immigration Department did not pay the rent increase. She responded, 'We will cross that bridge when we come to it ... but I imagine that there would be a major protest staged outside the facility by most of the island community.'³⁴ Geoff Glass, a shire councillor, wrote to Senator Bolkus: 'The continued holding of 66 men, women and children in a "hot box" is deemed by this community to be inhumane. In addition, there appears to be unnecessary confinement, given that this is an island.'³⁵ Glass told the *West Australian* that the Immigration Department had failed to develop a contingency plan to deal with boat people. Furthermore, the local sentiment was 'that the goodwill and generosity of the Christmas Island community had been abused' by the Immigration Department.³⁶

The Lorikeets were transferred from Christmas Island to Port Hedland in late April 1995. In response to the islander hospitality that they received, the Lorikeets wrote a letter of appreciation to the people of Christmas Island. This was tabled at a shire council meeting and published in the *Islander*.

Letter of thanks to all those very helpful and concerned Christmas Islanders.

We, a group of 66 people, fleeing from China had finally landed on your island after an extremely long voyage. When we were in utmost distress and without support, we have been fortunate to be able to receive your generous help and assistance. This not only enabled us to experience the warmth and tender care but also allowed us the opportunity to look forward to a brighter future. Currently, we do not own a single thing and can only hope to repay all your bounties, kindness and generosity in future. However, all we could do now is to sincerely say, 'Thank you all very much.' Finally we wish you all good health and may good luck always be with you.

³³ Norman Aisbett, 'Island wants \$20,000 rent', *West Australian*, republished in *Islander*, 7 April 1995, 10.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

Yours sincerely,
All Refugees,
18 April 1995³⁷

After the Lorikeets departed Christmas Island, Sino-Vietnamese and Chinese boat people continued arriving until 1999. Table 2.1 shows the total numbers of Sino-Vietnamese and Chinese boat people to arrive on Christmas Island.

Table 3.1: Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese arrivals.

Boat name	Date	Number	Origin	Results
<i>Labrador</i>	23/08/92	68: 65 adults, 3 children plus 3 babies	China	22 refugees, 3 humanitarian entry, 2 escapees, 42 departures
<i>Norwich</i>	30/10/92	113: 102 adults, 11 children	China	113 departures
<i>Toto</i>	28/05/94	69: 49 adults, 9 children plus 1 baby	China (35) and Sino- Vietnamese (24)	22 refugees, 1 bridging visa 1 escapee, 35 departures
<i>Lorikeet</i>	18/01/95	65: 46 adults, 19 children, plus 4 babies	Sino-Vietnamese	1 refugee, 68 departures
<i>Teal</i>	06/02/96	46: 34 adults, 12 children	China	46 departures
<i>Wattle Bird</i>	14/03/96	37: 25 adults, 12 children	China	37 departures
<i>Yellow Bird</i>	06/05/96	61: 48 adults, 13 children	China	61 departures
<i>Zebra Finch</i>	07/05/96	62: 36 adults, 26 children	China	62 departures
<i>Acacia</i>	09/05/96	55: 31 adults, 26 children	China	55 departures
<i>Banksia</i>	10/05/96	66: 46 adults, 20 children	China	66 departures
<i>Dahlia</i>	26/05/96	40: 31 adults, 9 children	China	40 departures
<i>Freesia</i>	05/06/96	86: 58 adults, 9 children	China (85) and Sino-Vietnamese (1)	86 departures
<i>Ivanhoe</i>	18/11/99	62: 41 adults, 21 children	China	62 departures
<i>Valentine</i>	21/12/99	73: 67 adults, 6 children	China	73 departures

Source: HREOC, 'Those Who have Come across the Seas: Detention of Unauthorised Arrivals', 11 May 1998.

In early 1995, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between Australia and China, which resulted in China becoming a safe third country. Under section 91D of the Migration Act, a safe third country is one where a

³⁷ Lorikeets, 'Letter to the editor', *Islander*, 21 April 1995, 10.

non-citizen has a 'prescribed connection with the country' or has a 'right to enter and reside in that country'. Sino-Vietnamese boat people who had previously resided in China were automatically rejected from the refugee determination process and returned to China.

The safe third-country legislation did not affect those boat people who were Chinese citizens. However, this cohort faced a different challenge when entering into the refugee determination process. During an initial screening interview between the detainee and an immigration officer, it was determined whether the interviewee had valid claims to engage Australia's protection obligations. If the detainee was screened into the refugee determination process, he or she was assigned a migration agent. If screened out, the person was removed from Australia as soon as practicable.³⁸ Initial screening interviews were later condemned by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, as detainees were not specifically asked if they were seeking Australia's protection or if they would like legal advice.³⁹ Chinese nationals had little knowledge about their right to apply for asylum, the technical requirements to meet the Refugee Convention or how to request legal advice to assist in making an application. Taylor points out that 80 per cent of boat people were deported without requesting legal advice.⁴⁰ Schloenhardt notes that issues such as an inability to understand English and unfamiliarity with legal and administrative processes would have disadvantaged the Chinese.⁴¹ Consequently, as the Chinese were screened out of refugee process and returned to China, this deterred future asylum seekers making the journey to Christmas Island.

Overall, the local community disagreed with how the government dealt with the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people. This is illustrated through the shire council and UCIW's campaign against the government's treatment of the Lorikeets. However, the local community's antagonistic relationship with the government was not confined to asylum seekers. Political activities and campaigns date back to the UCIW formation when its members lobbied the

³⁸ HREOC, 'Those Who Have Come across the Seas', 24.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Savitri Taylor, 'Should unauthorised arrivals in Australia have free access to advice and assistance?', *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 6, no. 1 (2000): 34–58.

⁴¹ Schloenhardt, 'Australia and the boat people', 51.

government for racial equality and better working and living conditions. In order to understand why some islanders challenged the government and advocated for the boat people, a discussion about the island's history of racial discrimination and islanders' own experiences of marginalisation and desire for a better life is illuminating.

Experiencing marginalisation

From Margaret's Knoll lookout, high above sea level, the brutal scars caused by phosphate mining to the landscape are still obvious. The land has barely been rehabilitated and large rocky pinnacles from phosphate extraction are visible. Using hand shovels called *changkils*, the first indentured labourers dug out phosphate.⁴² Observing the harsh terrain, it must have been a strenuous task for indentured labourers. One local community organisation, the Chinese Literary Association, paid homage to the first indentured labourers' hardships by erecting a memorial in 1971. The inscription reads:

After this island was annexed by the British Empire in 1888, Chinese labourers, driven by hardship to leave family, friends and homeland, crossed vast oceans, facing obstacles and danger and experiencing deep pain and sorrow, to reach this isolated, uninhabited island. They toiled long and hard for more than eighty years trying their utmost to open up this land and earn a living. This memorial erected by the Chinese Literary Association, honours our Chinese ancestors and late friends, and commemorates their story of endurance and courage, written with their blood, sweat and tears. Lest we forget.⁴³

Like the first indentured labourers, some Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people came for a better life. Seeking a better life is deeply embedded in the history of indentured labourers. For example, Chan Puck told Neale how he came to be on Christmas Island in 1948: 'We were very poor farmers with not enough food. But I was lucky – we had a cow. There was not many in our village so I could get a good price.'⁴⁴ The sale of the family cow funded his

⁴² Jan Adams and Margaret Neale, *Christmas Island the Early Years 1888 to 1958* (Chapman, ACT: B. Neale), 1993, 36

⁴³ The memorial is located in the Chinese cemetery. The inscription is in Chinese and I have relied on the translation by Helene Bartleson, *Golden Leaves: An Introduction to the Chinese Cemeteries of Christmas Island* (Springwood, NSW: BooBook Editions, 2008), 50–1.

⁴⁴ Margaret Neale, *We were the Christmas Islanders: Reminiscences and Recollections of the People of an Isolated Island, the Australian Territory of Christmas Island, Indian Ocean* (Chapman, ACT: B. Neale), 1988, 110.

journey to Hong Kong and from there to Singapore where he was recruited as an indentured labourer. In Neale's interviews with former indentured labourers Lee Yeung and Ng Bah Kyat it is evident that workers were victimised upon their arrival to the island. Yeung explains that when indentured labourers arrived on the island, a blue dot was tattooed on their hands to show 'that I belonged to him'.⁴⁵ The 'him' Yeung refers to was Singaporean Ong Boon Tat, who sourced the majority of Chinese labour for the mining company.⁴⁶ Tattooed workers were referred to as *mai chee chai* by their supervisors, which translated to 'young slave'.⁴⁷ The following interview between Neale and Ng Bah Kyat reveals how indentured labourers became entrapped in the exploitive system of cheap labour after selling themselves to Ong Boon Tat:

MN: These people knew then that they actually sold themselves for this money; they knew?

NBK: Before they accept the offer – I don't know – but once they arrive in Christmas Island, of course, they had no choice.

MN: Yes. So they were young and often uneducated Chinese who would not understand. All they knew is that they were going to get some money for their family and they worry about the rest later?

NBK: Yes. They might have been told, but one thing I can think of is they might have been told at the time they were recruited that they have been offered a job outside China with a good prospect, with good money to earn, that is all. I think for that reason they offer to come. When they came, of course, things were different; there is nothing for them to argue about it.⁴⁸

Both Lee Yeung and Ng Bah Kyat's accounts suggest they were exploited by the BPC. However, Yeung explained:

They used to call us, with the mark on, *mai chee hai* – like a 'slave', like being sold, but we didn't feel much about that because we went there on our own choice, not forced to go. We didn't feel like we were sold

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁶ Ng Bah Kyat, Interview transcript, *Christmas Island Oral History Project*, Margaret and Jan Adams, National Library Australia, Canberra, 1987.

⁴⁷ Ng Bah Kyat, interview, 1987.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

to the Company like a pig. After working more than one year you could leave if you like – not forced to work there.⁴⁹

Whether or not people could make autonomous decisions about staying or leaving the island, they were lured by the prospect of higher wages and consequently exploited in their quest for a better life. Many indentured labourers never left the island or challenged the colonial working practices. Moore defines this as ‘cultural kidnapping’. Speaking of the Kanakas in Queensland, he explains:

Regardless of what good intentions European recruiters may have had towards the Melanesians, and the voluntary enlistment by many Melanesians, Europeans were taking cultural advantage of them. Those who were not physically kidnapped were certainly culturally kidnapped.⁵⁰

Moore argues that the only justification for why the Melanesians left their island for 50 years was the financial benefits of working abroad.⁵¹

According to long-term resident Zahrul, racism was institutionalised in everyday island life. He grew up on the island in the 1950s after his mother brought him there from Singapore. Two schools existed on island, and an islander’s race determined which school he or she would attend. He recalled a childhood memory where racial segregation was the norm, like being ‘shooed off’ at the European swimming pool: ‘I was just sitting on the bench – not swimming!’⁵² He remembered that once as a child he sat in the shade outside a carpenter’s shop in the Settlement when a European man told him he could not sit there. When he said he refused to move, the man threatened to call the police.⁵³ As a man who suffered racism, talking about the past was still ‘painful’.⁵⁴ What was obvious during his interview was that Asian islanders did not question racial discriminatory practices in everyday life but instead accepted the status quo: ‘I don’t think we really noticed what was going on.’⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Neale, *We Were the Christmas Islanders*, 41

⁵⁰ Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, ed. Institute for Papua New Guinea Studies and (Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press), 1985: xi

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 47.

⁵² Interview with Zahrul, Christmas Island, 14 December 2008.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

Not being unaccustomed to anything other than racial discrimination was illustrated by island-born resident Choy Lan Seet. Her father came as an indentured labourer from China and his hand was tattooed with a blue dot. Reflecting on the island situation before the UCIW pursued its quest for equality, she explains:

People that came here, like my parents arrived in the forties before the war. Because they came from China they didn't know the human rights. They were used to being told what to do and what not to do by their superiors. At this time the mine, the phosphate company was owned by the British Phosphate Commission (BPC). It was all very colonial. It was the system then, whatever you were told what to do, you would do it and not to question, and that's how it was run ... So, this is how it went for a good number of years before the Union was formed in 1975. So those days the employment conditions, the housing conditions, the living conditions; everything was all very poor. For example; there were ten of us, seven of us children and my grandma and my parents. We were all just living in one unit, just one bedroom.⁵⁶

The situation began to change when Christmas Island came under Australian jurisdiction. The island's population comprised two groups: long-term Chinese and Malays, and new workers who were mainly young men from Malaysia and Singapore. As explained in Chapter One, new workers came on contracts and were prohibited to settle permanently on the island. This prohibition was enforced once workers signed an agreement (see Figure 2.2) stating: 'I understand and accept that my employment at Christmas Island with The British Phosphate Commissioners will not qualify me nor any of my dependants for permanent residence on Christmas Island nor make me (us) eligible for residence in Australia.'⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Interview with Choy Lan Seet, Christmas Island, 13 February 2009.

⁵⁷ See Figure 2.2. Thank you to Kelvin Lee for providing this document. Note the name 'Lee Kok Bin' is Kelvin's birth name on the document.

To: The Administrator
Australian Territory of Christmas Island

From: Name: Lee Kok Hin
Travel Document Number: A.2552350

I understand and accept that my employment at Christmas Island with The British Phosphate Commissioners will not qualify me nor any of my dependants for permanent residence on Christmas Island nor make me (us) eligible for residence in Australia.

Dated at Perang this 5th
day of October 19 73.

Signature: Lee Kok Hin
Witness: [Signature]

Copies to: Employer (1)
Employee (1)

Kapada: Pengurus
Pulau Krismas bagi kawasan Australia

Daripada: Nama: Lee Kok Hin
No. Serat dokumen perjalanan: A.2552350

Saya faham dan menerima bahawa pekerjaan saya di Pulau Krismas dengan Pasuruh Jaya Tinggi Fosfat British tidak membolehkan saya (kami) menjadi penduduk Australiak.

Bertarikh Perang hari 5th
bulan October 19 73.

Tandatangan: Lee Kok Hin
Saksi: [Signature]

Salinan kepada: Majikan (1)
Orang gaji (1)

Figure 3.2: No permanent residency: Kelvin Lee's agreement

While the new wave of indentured labourers did not query their working contracts, they found the racial discriminatory practices confronting. Two groups of Asian islanders emerged: new islanders who disagreed with the outdated colonial practices, and the old islanders who were accustomed to the system. The uneasiness felt by new islanders when confronted with racial discrimination is evident in Neale's interview with Lim Sai Meng. He was born in Malaysia and came to the island in 1973. He told Neale how he questioned the racial discriminatory practices when his child was only permitted to attend the island's Asian-only school.

It was after some time that I started to look at the education system on the island, mainly because I had a young daughter and the day would come when I had to send her to school. It horrified me that there were two systems, two forms of education. You had one schooling system for the Caucasians and one for the Asians. There were two types of public transport, one for what we called staff members of the British Phosphate Commissioners, which was once again Caucasian and the other was a 'long bus' which was a converted sort of cattle truck for the Asians: two swimming pools, one for the coloureds and one for the whites.⁵⁸

Lim was not alone in his frustrations over the racial discriminatory practices. Ron De Cruz, who arrived on the island in 1977, was disturbed by being treated as an 'Asian worker'. From 1978 to 1979, an illiterate Australian man supervised Ron while his Australian colleagues employed in similar positions earned more than \$1,000 per month compared to his \$200.⁵⁹ He explained, 'When you first come you accept the conditions. You know they are wrong and you are right but you cannot say anything.'⁶⁰

To further compound the racial discriminatory practices, a 'never to return' (NTR) system operated. According to Lim Sai Meng, 'If that worker, has played up according to the advice of the supervisors when they go on work, that supervisor goes down to the labour office, marks his card NTR, and that poor guy who is out on leave never returns to the island again.'⁶¹ This system intimidated workers like Ron and Lim from speaking out against unfair conditions and systematically subjected Asians to poor working conditions to ensure cheap labour.⁶²

In 1981, the UCIW won its campaign for wage parity, racial equality and permanent residency. While the union and its members were able to hold the Australian Government accountable to ensuring fair conditions for all on the

⁵⁸ Neale, *We Were the Christmas Islanders*, 169

⁵⁹ Interview with Ron De Cruz by Therese Collier, *Christmas Island Oral Histories* (audio recording), ed Tanya Schonewald, Christmas Island Neighbourhood Centre, 2006.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Les Waters, *The Union of Christmas Island Workers* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 12.

⁶² It is unclear when the NTR unofficially began. Interviewees in Neale's project, such as Lee Yeung, mentioned that if workers complained they were told to leave by mining supervisors.

island, this quest extended its focus to the rights of asylum seekers in later periods, which is demonstrated in the following parallel testimonies.

Encountering the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people

Anthony first came to the island in 1978 from Singapore, which he left because there was 'too much competition' for work. He described his early memories of arriving on Christmas Island:

When I come here I start working with a company, which I can tell is very racist. I was imported from Singapore agent and when we come here, from Singapore, from Malaysia, they call us 'Asian Worker' so they pay us Asian wages. There were two wages; Asian wages and Australian wages ... I only got twelve dollars a day ... We were all educated in Singapore so we know what is right but the old people say no good, keep your mouth shut or they will send you home.⁶³

Anthony not only criticised previous working arrangements but also Asians' former living conditions and racial segregation:

I think a jail [cell] might be bigger! And those single person from Australia, they live in a donga! And Silver City⁶⁴ is for married quarter, so strict, you can't go here, you can't go there, if I walk down there the police car will come.⁶⁵

Anthony vividly recalled his involvement in the UCIW's campaigns for social justice, 'I join the union and became very active, we work together, we fight together.'⁶⁶

Anthony not only advocated for the rights of islanders but also sought ways to assist the Chinese boat people who were subjected to government policies. When the Chinese boat people first arrived he said, 'There was lots of cooking ... We got all the clothing for them so they feel very warm welcome.'⁶⁷ While volunteering to serve food to the Chinese boat people, it became apparent to Anthony that the Chinese arrivals were prohibited by the Immigration Department from phoning relatives back in China:

⁶³ Interview with Anthony, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁶⁴ Silver City, a neighbourhood similar to the Settlement and the Kampong, received its name because most houses have aluminium roofs. Anthony used the word 'jail' to emphasise the small size of his accommodation.

⁶⁵ Interview with Anthony.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

We are not allowed to talk to them. Not even I could when I was with Yeong Chong⁶⁸ serving them food but the Immigration people say that we are not allowed to talk to them. But because we are Chinese they [asylum seekers] write letters and then they ask us to post for them. So we go to post office and buy a stamp and send them to China.⁶⁹

Anthony's own experiences of being a migrant provided a platform for discussing the Chinese boat arrivals. He said:

I also come from overseas and the only thing I have different is one piece of paper, they [boat people] come with little ... Maybe I am lucky because I got the paper and you can't live here without the paper, but without that isn't much difference. My feeling is that because I came here, I was bullied by the people from the white policy type.⁷⁰

Anthony's response can be understood through the lens of Hollands' study into the impact of 'direct contact' between Dutch volunteers who assisted newly arrived refugees in the Netherlands.⁷¹ Hollands found that as a consequence of direct impact, 'identification' and 'imagination' became reoccurring themes that played a significant part in one's beliefs and responses to refugees. In this context, 'identification' refers to one's 'recognition of similarities between the experiences of refugees and their own' while 'imagination' implies the 'recognition of similarities through the mediation of empathy and fantasy'.⁷² Anthony's own experiences of marginalisation – or, as he put it, 'bullied by the people from the white policy type' led to him identifying with the Chinese asylum seekers that he came into contact with.⁷³

Kelvin Lee moved to the island in 1973. Today, he is a shire councillor and a senior member of the UCIW. Formerly from Penang, he was first employed as a diesel fitter by the BPC. After responding to an advertisement in a Malaysian newspaper, the *Star*, he travelled to Singapore and boarded an empty phosphate ship; the *Hoi Houw* bound for Christmas Island. Recalling how he felt before commencing his migration to the island, he said, 'I'm only

⁶⁸ Yeong Choong was a Chinese restaurant on the island.

⁶⁹ Interview with Anthony.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Marlie Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance: The impact of direct contact with refugees on Dutch hosts', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (2001): 295–314.

⁷² *ibid.*, 301.

⁷³ Anthony is referring to the White Australia Policy when he says 'white policy type'.

nineteen years old, so it seems to be an adventurous journey. I'm looking forward and I'm quite proud they [the BPC] offered me the job.'⁷⁴

Kelvin did not reside continuously on the island. Due to his active role in the UCIW, he was deemed a 'troublemaker' by the BPC and was not allowed back to the island despite being an Australian citizen.⁷⁵ His work performance was deemed 'unsatisfactory' with no further explanation and he was dismissed by the BPC when overseas on leave in 1981.⁷⁶ He was not allowed to return to the island, even to pack up his belongings. The BPC packed up his personal belongings, which made him 'feel destructed, not happy but what can I do?' Despite him requesting that his belongings be sent to Thailand where he had moved, the BPC sent his effects to Perth. Kelvin did not return to the island until 1995, when he travelled back and set up a workshop.

When asked about his first memories of the Chinese boat people, Kelvin explained: 'Those people are kept in the hall and then it got this sort of barricade with the rope and then they cannot cross over here and we cannot go inside there.'⁷⁷ He then went on to say:

During that time I was also sort of member of the CLA and the people down here when they see Chinese they sort of give a hand, human nature make you react in that way, and during that time we just volunteer and just do what we can do ... we just do our best to make them feel more at ease.⁷⁸

Kelvin explained that when islanders encountered asylum seekers it led to them responding: 'When those boat-loads of people come here from Asian countries. I think humans react in a certain way, with pity.'⁷⁹ Consequently, islanders felt the need to take action for the asylum seekers, 'They are very sympathetic to the Chinese and actually they buy things and they do make donations.'⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 23 October 2008.

⁷⁵ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 9 October 2008.

⁷⁶ Kelvin Lee showed me the letter he received from the BPC.

⁷⁷ Interview with Kelvin Lee, 9 October 2009.

⁷⁸ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁷⁹ Interview with Kelvin Lee, 16 October 2009.

⁸⁰ Interview with Kelvin Lee, 9 October 2008.

Not only were notions of moral proximity and the need to take responsibility for the asylum seekers evident in Kelvin's response to the Chinese asylum seekers but also identification. His own experiences with Australia's immigration policy provided a backdrop when discussing the asylum seekers. He said:

We ourselves, we know that we are all eligible to stay here but ... these people [asylum seekers] they came down here, they don't have a visa and they are not allowed to stay ... For ourselves it took us numbers of years to really get our status.⁸¹

For indentured labourers like Kelvin and Anthony, the Chinese boat peoples' journey paralleled with their own experiences. For example, Kelvin said: 'The community they think that the right way to treat them [is] well after having the journey on the little boat and for us they were the same kind of people.'⁸²

Long-term Chinese resident Foo Kee Heng also recalled the Chinese boat people. Malaysian born, he came to the island in 1970 as an indentured labourer at the age of 22. Like both the first indentured labourers and some Chinese boat people, he left his home for a better life.

I want to see the world ... I have a look ... Here [Christmas Island] I try to make myself stay on, keep on because it's my purpose to have my pay so every month I can send some money back to help my father in the business. Because of the family, I'm the number nine. There are ten.⁸³

Like Anthony and Kelvin, Foo spoke extensively about marginalisation, 'There are some areas we cannot go. It is only for the whites, the white Australians. Silver City – you cannot go around, hanging around in the evenings or what, walk or whatever, anyone Asian going down there.'⁸⁴ He was very active with the UCIW and the rights of others. This concern for those who suffered at the hands of the government extended to the Chinese boat people, and he attempted to make contact with them:

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Interview with Foo Kee Heng, Christmas Island, 28 October 2008.

⁸⁴ Michelle Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion', Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 2007.

All the boat people that have been detained during the time is at the sports hall, OK and we want to see ... they [immigration authorities] don't allow us to see. So they [boat people] are totally cut off from our community you know. Very strictly guarded.⁸⁵

While islanders' own experiences of marginalisation constituted one aspect of how they responded to the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese asylum seekers, the boat conditions in which asylum seekers arrived was another important factor.

Witnessing boat conditions

Unlike most mainland Australians, the proximity islanders have to asylum seekers has allowed them opportunities to observe the boat conditions of arriving asylum seekers. Witnessing the dire conditions led to sympathetic responses for the plight of the Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese asylum seekers. A local story that was frequently told to me during research was 'not even a grain of rice was left on the boat' when the Chinese arrived.

Marcus came to the island in 1987, where he bought a local business. Speaking of the conditions of the Chinese boat arrivals, Marcus explained:

They used to come here in boats you wouldn't even float in the bath ... They had all come from South China.⁸⁶ Rat infested, cockroach infested with no navigational equipment. The first boats that used to come in used to navigate by transistor radio. They would have a little transistor and we had an AM station in those days and you got a lot better coverage with an AM station. They somehow knew the frequency, which was 1422. Put the radio station on 1422 and stand out on the boat and where the static was at its loudest that's how they'd find the island. They'd steer towards the static. Later boats had GPS and that sort of caper but the early boats had nothing like that. But they got here. [It was] unbelievable ... [how they] lived in stinking, dirty holes in those boats ... just shocking.⁸⁷

Ramli, also spoke of the state of the boats. Originally born in Singapore, his parents brought him to the island when he was two years old. He lived most of his life on the island until his early twenties. He was a teenager when he witnessed the boat arrivals:

⁸⁵ Interview with Foo Kee Heng.

⁸⁶ Interview with Marcus, 19 September 2008.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Well the first thing that came to mind was how I can't believe they can fit so many people into one little boat. Looking so cramped and dirty and there were mice and cockroaches running around. It was gross just to imagine.⁸⁸

While Ramli would have not have been able to see the mice and cockroaches from afar, some islanders, such as Beth's husband James, did go on the boats and witnessed their appalling conditions. She explained, 'My partner at that time was working as the environment officer and part of his job was to go out on the boats and he got back from the Chinese boat and said, "Oh my God!"'⁸⁹

Long-term resident Mason, who migrated to the island in 1977 from Malaysia recalled the boat conditions. He mentioned how islanders had to transfer passengers from a leaking boat to a barge, and that 'the cops, quarantine, customs, everyone even the workers became ill after coming into contact with the boat people after the transfer'.⁹⁰ Speaking of the difficult journey the Chinese people endured, he said:

They [boat people] had hardly any food to eat or nothing. They say they had dead people on the boat and they had to just throw them overboard. And these people did not go to Indonesia; they travelled all the way from Vietnam. They lost everything.⁹¹

When islanders learned that the boat people came with nothing, it often led them to reflect on why the Chinese might attempt to seek a better life abroad. For example Marcus explained:

Overall the community here did not worry about them too much. I really think for someone that gets on a boat like that with ... [only] your life belongings and not much more clothes than what you are standing up in and travels a couple of days in a boat that you wouldn't get on in a river to get away from your country there has got to be something dramatically wrong with where you come from. Your living conditions must be horrendous to put your whole life at risk in doing what they did and travelling fifty on a tub that should only have ten people standing time only ... You would have to be really desperate.⁹²

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the way in which asylum seekers first arrived on Christmas Island. It began by providing an overview of Chinese and Sino-

⁸⁸ Interview with Ramli, 26 October 2008.

⁸⁹ Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁹⁰ The workers he is referring to are the stevedores.

⁹¹ Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion'.

⁹² Interview with Marcus.

Vietnamese arrivals in Australia from 1992 to 1999. It was shown that these asylum seekers were either transferred to mainland detention centres or were returned to their homeland. Initial encounters between islanders and asylum seekers were also introduced. While islanders were unable to hear the stories of these asylum seekers from a narrative proximity perspective, they physically encountered asylum seekers through witnessing the poor boat conditions followed by the detention of asylum seekers in the sports hall. These physical encounters precipitated moral responses, which centred on islanders' concern for the conditions that asylum seekers were detained in and the Australian Government's handling of the asylum seekers. For some islanders, these moral responses were interwoven with islanders' own experiences of marginalisation. Chapters Four and Five discuss the islanders' experience of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq and the Tampa affair and build on the idea that proximity can be physical, moral and narrative. Chapter Four takes these three aspects into consideration when hospitality becomes central to islander responses, as is their involvement in the reception, processing and detention of asylum seekers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Islanders and Boat Arrivals: 1997 to 2001

By late 1999, the flow of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese boat people coming to Christmas Island had ceased. However, from 1997 to 2001, islanders experienced a different group of asylum seekers originating mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq. As these boats arrived from Indonesia, concerns about 'queue jumpers' and 'illegal migrants' heightened on the mainland; yet such sentiments rarely surfaced on Christmas Island.¹ The chapter defines the characteristics of this period of asylum seeker arrivals on Christmas Island and examines islander responses to those they encountered.

The first section of the chapter explains who the asylum seekers were and the nature of their journeys. It discusses how islanders witnessed an increase in asylum seekers, particularly women and children during this period, along with islanders' first experiences with asylum seeker deaths at sea. The second section explores islanders' extensive involvement in the reception, processing and welfare of asylum seekers. In this section, hospitality is discussed, including Friese's work, as a way of understanding how spontaneous and localised detention arrangements are defining characteristics of this period of boat arrivals.² In the third section, I discuss Jacobsen's research about host communities in relation to interviews, articles in the *Islander* and local government community notices. Jacobsen's theories on social receptiveness, cultural meanings and beliefs about refugees are applicable to the Christmas Island case study.³

¹ David Corlett, 'Politics, symbolism and the asylum seeker issue', *UNSW Law Journal* 23, no. 3 (2000): 13–32.

² Heidrun Friese, 'Border economies: Lampedusa and the nascent migration industry', *Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 66–84.

³ Karen Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses of host governments to mass refugee influxes', *International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 655–78.

Asylum seeker arrivals on Christmas Island

From 1997 to 1999, 28 boats arrived in Australian waters, with those on board being mainly single men.⁴ From 1999, an increase in boat arrivals precipitated a more strident government response constructed around deterrence.⁵ The majority of asylum seekers who arrived from 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2001 were from Afghanistan and Iraq (and to lesser extent Iran, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).⁶ During this period, 42.5% came from Afghanistan and 39.6% from Iraq.⁷ A total of 129 boats arrived carrying 8,312 asylum seekers.⁸

Afghans who arrived in Australia during this period were mainly Hazaras, an ethnic group that had been enslaved, discriminated and persecuted since King Abdul Rahman Khan ruled Afghanistan (1880–1901).⁹ Unlike the majority of Afghans who practise Sunni Islam, Hazaras believe in the tenets of Shia Islam, pledging ‘allegiance to Ali, son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad, and Ali’s descendants.’¹⁰ Under the Taliban’s rule (1996 to 2001), Hazaras faced significant discrimination and persecution on mass scale.¹¹ Most had no choice other than flee abroad or face persecution. Many Hazaras fled to neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran during the Taliban’s reign while a small number chose Australia as a safe haven.¹²

As a result of human rights violations in Iraq during President Saddam Hussein’s reign, over 1 million Iraqis fled the country, with some 350,000

⁴ Janet Phillips and Harriet Spinks, ‘Boat Arrivals in Australia Since 1976: Research Paper’, Department of Parliamentary Services, 23 July 2013, accessed 20 August 2014. http://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/bn/2012-2013/boatarrivals#_Toc347230718.

⁵ Andreas Schloenhardt, ‘Deterrence, detention and denial: Asylum seekers in Australia’, *University of Queensland Law Journal* 22, no. 1 (2002): 54–73; Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia’s Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of Tampa* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002).

⁶ Graeme Hugo, ‘From compassion to compliance? Trends in refugee and humanitarian migration in Australia’, *GeoJournal* 56, no. 1 (2002): 31.

⁷ *ibid.*, 31.

⁸ Phillips and Spinks, ‘Boat arrivals in Australia since 1976’.

⁹ Hafizullah Emadi, ‘The Hazaras and their role in the process of political transformation in Afghanistan’, *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1997): 367.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 364.

¹¹ William Maley, ‘Security, people-smuggling, and Australia’s new Afghan refugees’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 3 (2001): 351–70.

¹² For further information on Hazara asylum seeker migration, see Alessandro Monsutti and Patrick Camiller, *War and migration: social networks and economic strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

taking refuge in Iran.¹³ Human Rights Watch points out that Saddam's regime 'persecuted political opponents and ethnic minorities with extreme measures including forced relocation, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, disappearance, summary execution, use of chemical weapons and the destruction of entire villages'.¹⁴ From 1998 to June 2001, 4,100 Iraqis arrived by boat in Australia, including Christmas Island.¹⁵

From October 1999 onwards, Afghans, Iraqis and others who arrived by boat were first held in detention centres such as Port Hedland (Western Australia) or Woomera (South Australia). They were later subjected to the Howard Government's policy of temporary protection visas (TPVs) when released from detention. Those who arrived by boat onshore were not granted the same entitlements as those who came under Australia's humanitarian offshore resettlement program. TPV holders had no rights to family reunion and no automatic right of return if they left Australia.¹⁶ Despite being accepted as refugees, TPV holders were only afforded Australia's protection for either a three- or five-year period. Asylum seekers were required to apply for a permanent protection visa when their TPVs expired. From 1999, more women and children began arriving by boat. This has been attributed to the Howard Government's introduction of TPVs and no right to family reunion.¹⁷ This change in demographics was observed by Christmas Island's Medical Officer, Doctor Michael Kwek:

There are more women and children among the new arrivals. In one recent group of asylum seekers, over 40 per cent were children, the majority of whom were below 12 years of age. The number of female asylum seekers has also increased, and there were several women in advanced stages of pregnancy.¹⁸

¹³ Human Rights Watch, 'By invitation only: Australian asylum policy', *Human Rights Watch* 14, no. 10 (2003): 8, accessed 26 February 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/australia/australia1202.pdf>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Oxfam and A Just Australia, 'Between Iraq and a hard place: Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers in Australia', April 2003, 8, accessed 25 February 2013, <http://www.ajustaustralia.com/resource.php?act=attache&id=39>.

¹⁶ Hugo, 'From compassion to compliance?', 34.

¹⁷ Mary Crock, Ben Saul and Azadeh Dastyari, *Future Seekers II: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia* (Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press, 2006): 5.

¹⁸ Michael Kwek, 'Asylum Seekers on Christmas Island: The Impact on Health, Social Life and the Environment', report published by the Indian Ocean Territories Health Service, Christmas Island, August 2001.

Isabella, a local resident who was on the island during this period recalled the increase in family groups:

They basically looked like people who had been at sea for three days on not a very good boat ... They may not have eaten nor had much to drink ... There were lots of kids, women, babies. It was a lot more families that came over.¹⁹

Up to 300 passengers per boat arrived during the second wave of asylum seekers. Eric described witnessing the high number of asylum seekers on boats, 'There is a couple of hundred of them [asylum seekers] and they are all over the boat. On the boat, on its side, the roof, the walls, I tell you they were everywhere, they were that cramped, so many.'²⁰ According to some islanders, asylum seeker boats became a semi-permanent fixture on the ocean's horizon from 1999 to 2001. Islanders recalled that they would simply gaze out to sea to see another 'little crappy boat.'²¹

In order to reach Australia, the typical process for asylum seekers was first flying to either Malaysia or Indonesia from either their homelands or neighbouring countries. At that time visas were not required upon entry into Malaysia and Indonesia for those holding a passport from an Islamic country. Asylum seekers who flew to Malaysia then went to Indonesia by either plane or boat. From Indonesia, asylum seekers boarded boats bound for Christmas Island or other Australian territories.²²

Several factors determined why asylum seekers chose Australia as a final destination. The first factor is that during this period Australia was one of the cheapest 'tickets' on offer by people smugglers to a Western country that is a signatory to the United Nation's 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*.²³ The second factor is that Australia is considered to be a rights respecting country and is a signatory to the Refugee Convention. In Human Rights Watch's research with asylum seekers who came to Australia, it noted that Australia had a reputation among refugees as a 'defender of human

¹⁹ Interview with Isabella, Christmas Island, 19 February 2009.

²⁰ Interview with Eric, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

²¹ Interview with Samantha, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

²² Robert Manne and David Corlett, 'Sending them home: Refugees and the new politics of indifference', *Quarterly Essay* 13 (2004): 6.

²³ *ibid.*

rights' and 'frequently mentioned Australia's democratic government and its civil and political freedoms'.²⁴

The third factor relates to the situation faced by many Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers who fled to neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. Neither of these countries offers refugees permanent protection or legal status. Asylum seekers in countries such as these face problems in re-establishing their lives without fear of harassment from police and government authorities.²⁵ One option for asylum seekers is registering with UNHCR for resettlement abroad. However, this is not without extensive problems, including long wait periods. Frustrated by their precarious situation, some migrate towards countries that provide permanent protection. For those fleeing Afghanistan and Iraq, Australia was one of the few countries in the region that gives legal status to refugees once their claims for asylum are processed by the government. The fourth factor centres on the fact that transit countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are not signatories to the Refugee Convention. Neither country has provisions under their domestic laws to protect asylum seekers, effectively putting asylum seekers at risk of being arrested and detained.²⁶

Australia's border protection authorities regularly intercepted boats in Australian waters. However, some boats arrived directly on Christmas Island before the border authorities sighted them. Islanders regularly witnessed these boat arrivals. The *Islander* reported this when the community observed the arrival of 142 asylum seekers in August 1999: 'Arriving late in the afternoon most of the island population turned out not as a welcoming party but mainly for the sheer [sic] curiosity at the size of the vessel and the number of people crammed into it [sic] confines.'²⁷ When asylum seekers arrived, some islanders assisted in bringing the asylum seekers ashore while others were involved in the reception, processing, welfare and catering for asylum seekers.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'By invitation only', 33.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 34–5.

²⁷ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Island facilities stretched', *Islander*, 20 August 1999, 1.

What particularly characterised this period was ‘spontaneous hospitality’ and localised modes of reception and processing.²⁸

Islanders were not only involved in the reception and processing of asylum seekers but in rescuing those stranded at sea. Islanders became acutely aware of the dangers asylum seekers faced when crossing the Indian Ocean. In July 1999, a tragedy involving Sri Lankan asylum seekers occurred, with four drowning, 11 missing and five surviving. The *Islander* recounts the story where a yacht, *Gone Troppo*, discovered five survivors 80 kilometres north-west of Christmas Island. The boat was stranded at sea and the passengers bailed water for three days before it sank. Local doctors and police later set out on the harbourmaster’s boat *Fatima* in search of the missing passengers while ‘agencies and individuals on Christmas Island joined together with the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in an air and sea search operation’.²⁹ Islanders banded together to assist in the search and rescue operation, which was captured in the *Islander*’s article, ‘Island unites in rescue operation’:

The recent tragedy involving the loss of 15 lives in our northern waters, and the subsequent action undertaken by Island residents and others in the search and rescue operations has illustrated the resourcefulness and strength of character of this Island’s people.³⁰

Detective Sergeant David Baker from the AFP later thanked the local community’s active response during the tragedy, with the *Islander* reporting Baker as being ‘overwhelmed by the response he had from the community offering to assist in the operation’.³¹ The Sri Lankan boat tragedy led to some islanders reflecting on the plights of those that took to the seas. This was reflected by the Shire of Christmas Island: ‘The disaster occurring only 80 kilometres from Christmas Island has left Christmas Island residents saddened and wondering how many other refugee boats bound for our shores have met a similar fate.’³² For islanders this was not the last time they were faced with such a tragedy involving asylum seekers. In 2001, two Afghan women

²⁸ Friese, ‘Border economies’, 66–84.

²⁹ Shire of Christmas Island, ‘Miraculous rescue for 5 with 11 missing and 4 dead’, *Islander*, 23 July 1999, 1.

³⁰ Phil Oakley, ‘Island unites in rescue operation’, *Islander*, 23 July 1999, 8.

³¹ Shire of Christmas Island, ‘Miraculous rescue’, 7.

³² *ibid.*

drowned off the coast of Christmas Island (see Chapter Six). In 2010, 50 people drowned during what became known as the Christmas Island boat tragedy (see Chapter Ten).

Drawing on interviews with islanders and excerpts from the *Islander*, the following sections explore how spontaneous hospitality and localised detention arrangements defined and characterised islander narratives about asylum seekers during this period.

Spontaneous hospitality and localised detention arrangements

In her work on hospitality and Greece's management of refugees, Rozakou explains that the Greek term for hospitality *filoksenia* literally translates to *filia* (love) of the *ksenos* (stranger, plural *kseni*).³³ Historically, *filoksenia* and the politics of hospitality have been fundamental in how Greece has responded to outsiders through the demarcating of 'difference as a danger' while at the same time upholding Greek traditions offering hospitality to strangers dating back to classical antiquity and the Byzantine era.³⁴ Rozakou argues that hospitality, 'sets the boundaries between outsiders and insiders, and it is a practice of sovereignty of control over the stranger. It is a one-way offer and also a means of dealing with alterity.'³⁵ Rozakou goes on to say that hospitality limits the agency of the stranger whereby he or she must comply with the rules of the host. This in effect allows the host to control the stranger and the 'danger that he or she represents' while still offering refuge.³⁶ It is clear that a fundamental aspect of hospitality is in fact its dual nature. Rozakou notes that this duality is evident when considering the meaning of the word *filoksenia* and *ksenofobia* (xenophobia).³⁷ Derrida also highlights hospitality's contradictory nature in that the foreigner (*hostis*) can either be 'welcomed as guest or as enemy' and that 'hospitality, hostility, *hostpitality*' are all derived from the same root in Latin.³⁸

³³ Katerina Rozakou, 'The biopolitics of hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the management of refugees', *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3 (2012): 565.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 45.

In his seminal piece *Of Hospitality*, Derrida states that ‘absolute hospitality’ requires:

I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place that I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.³⁹

An example of Derrida’s description of absolute hospitality appears in local community responses to asylum seeker both on Christmas Island and the Italian island of Lampedusa. In Friese’s research on Lampedusa, she explains that the community’s response to the first boat people was dominated by local acts of hospitality. Local residents cooked for asylum seekers, with one recalling: ‘Women cooked for them and collected clothing.’⁴⁰ Locals were trained by the Italian Red Cross as volunteers to organise 24-hour care and accommodation of boat people. However, in the later stages spontaneous hospitality was replaced by a much more institutionalised response in much the same way as on Christmas Island (see Chapter Nine). As Friese notes, ‘Professionalization did change the relation to those who arrived and local solidarity, multiple gestures of hospitality converted into institutional reception and best practice fictions.’⁴¹

Hospitality on Christmas Island

Acts of spontaneous hospitality such as those cited by Friese were evident on Christmas Island, with asylum seekers being welcomed as guests and the act of ‘giving space’, to use Dikec’s term, was offered by some local residents.⁴² Initially, when asylum seekers arrived directly on Christmas Island, locals were involved in bringing asylum seekers ashore, reception, processing, accommodating and catering for the asylum seekers. One islander, Mia, recalled the hospitable acts carried out by islanders:

³⁹ *ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁰ Friese, ‘Border economies’, 72.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 73.

⁴² Mustafa Dikec, ‘Pera peras poros: Longing for spaces of hospitality’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, no. 1–2 (2002): 229.

I can remember that the community was very positive. They even ran out and gave them [asylum seekers] blankets. Because in those days people didn't worry about security, they just saw boat people that need help and they just ran out and helped ... I can remember a lot of the resort staff ... because one of the boats actually arrived at the Waterfall area near the casino and some of the staff actually gave some of the casinos' blankets and towels to them.⁴³

Mia's statement can be interpreted as absolute hospitality taking place on the island whereby the host gives place to the asylum seeker guest, making no request for his or her name nor an expectation of reciprocity. Acts of spontaneous hospitality are evident in the case of the Christmas Island casino caretaker rescuing an asylum seeker. In a media interview, he described his experience of saving a baby when a boat of 282 Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers arrived near the casino in 2000:

In moments like this you feel so much compassion, you just have to run to help ... One of them [an asylum seeker mother] just looked at me. She was desperate, and she was carrying this young baby. When I took the baby from her arms, the relief was so great. The baby just froze in my arms. No crying, almost no breathing and all the women were looking at me. I just turned around and waded into shore. When the mother got to the shore she couldn't take him for a minute, she was so relieved.⁴⁴

Once asylum seekers came ashore, they were detained in the sports hall. Government agencies such as the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and local authorities processed the asylum seekers and asked the local community to assist. Rozak's earlier points are insightful when considering the actual act of asylum seekers being detained, in that hospitality 'sets the boundaries between outsiders and insiders, and it is a practice of sovereignty of control over the stranger'⁴⁵ As a result of asylum seekers being detained, a boundary formed between asylum seekers and islanders. However, as a result of the localised detention arrangements contact between the two groups did not diminish. Members of the local community actively assisted asylum seekers. Furthermore, some islanders advocated against the way asylum seekers were

⁴³ Interview with Mia, 27 December 2008.

⁴⁴ Jason Koutsoukis, 'Arms of safety reach out to a shipload of misery', *Age*, 3 February 2000, 1.

⁴⁵ Rozakou, 'The biopolitics of hospitality', 565.

held. Some islanders claimed the asylum seekers were 'being held in inhumane conditions, forced to sleep on the concrete floor of a corrugated iron shed.'⁴⁶ One local resident, Phil Oakley, told the media, 'It really is Third World what we are providing here' and 'I really feel we could be doing a bit better.'⁴⁷ In a similar vein to Oakley, the shire reported:

The overcrowded Sports Hall, which is the transit home for the 142 people until arrangements can be made to relocate them to the mainland, is far from suitable for this purpose. While the toilets, ventilation, sleeping and eating arrangements are pitiful when compared to what the Federal Government recently laid on for the Bosnian refugees, the Police and local support agencies need to be commended for their efforts.⁴⁸

While the asylum seekers were detained on the island, it was obvious that some locals welcomed them as guests. Shelley recalled the local community's high level of interaction with the asylum seekers:

The people [asylum seekers] were taken to this sports hall, opposite the supermarket, and put in sort of emergency housing. They [local authorities such as AFP] brought in beds and what not. And although they were kept there in that place [the sports hall], which was really hot and really horrible, there was still the opportunity for people to go there ... There was a lot more interaction because it wasn't so policed. It was the local police, who are federal police, looking after it ... There wasn't like ten extra cops or anything, it was just the local people sorting it out and volunteers, anyone ... the SES⁴⁹ and volunteering organisations like that were invited to help and then people just showed up, average people going, 'Aw, those poor people staying in the sports hall, maybe they want something to do', so they'd just go down and chat, it was quite casual.⁵⁰

Some locals assisted where they could to help with the processing and interviewing of asylum seekers while others attempted to alleviate detainees' boredom. Islanders' willingness to assist was noted in public notices, with the island administrator commending the efforts of locals. For example, in 1999 island administrator Bill Taylor wrote:

⁴⁶ Sean Cowan, 'Shed for illegals criticised', *West Australian*, 9 January 2001, 24.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Island facilities stretched', *Islander*, 20 August 1999, 1.

⁴⁹ State Emergency Service.

⁵⁰ Interview with Shelley, Christmas Island, 25 February 2009.

Last week, Christmas Island was called on to host 142 illegal boat people. As had been the case with similar arrivals this year, they were processed, housed, fed and entertained in the usual Aussie, efficient way, despite the group's large size and gender mix. Well done once more to the AFP team, medical staff, Shire, supermarkets, restaurants and many community volunteers, without whose assistance the smooth repatriation to Port Hedland would not have been possible. Congratulations on another outstanding team effort.⁵¹

Localised detention arrangements were captured by Beth who first came to the island in 1999:

It was all very low key. It was just ridiculous when you consider, especially under Howard as well, 'we must protect our borders ... and everything has be high security' ... It was just ridiculous how casual it was and it was lovely. I mean it probably wasn't lovely for the people that were stuck in the hall but they weren't demonised, the people in the hall weren't demonised.⁵²

Some islanders were involved in the processing of asylum seekers. Those engaged ranged from islanders who worked for the AFP and Customs to locals who simply put their hands up to help out with the processing. Owen, who worked for the AFP during this period, recalled:

[We would] search the boat, most of the time, basically not control them but to protect them more than anything ... They [asylum seekers] were in a pretty poor state some of them. Stunned, shocked you would call it ... We'd plonk them down there [at the sports hall] and try and work out who was who ... most of them that turned up here would be just your everyday people from these countries [Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran] that weren't as well off as us.⁵³

Samantha spoke of the localised arrangements when it came to detaining and processing the boat people:

We had three to four police at that point that would go down to the Cove and help them in and then they were all moved to the skate

⁵¹ Bill Taylor, 'Iraqi arrivals', *Christmas Island Administration Bulletin*, no.52/99, 23 August 1999.

⁵² Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁵³ Michelle Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion', Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 2007.

park⁵⁴, sometimes hundreds, where they had mattresses on the floor...and the three to four local police would look after them.⁵⁵

Isabella also recalled the asylum seekers being detained in the sports hall:

So they [the police] would just block off the entire sports hall; and at one point they had too many so they got the navy in and had all navy tents out the back of the CLA, and then that got too much so they bought them up to Poon Saan Community Hall as well. But generally it was down in that hall and that was where we would play all of our sports and we'd be like 'Sport's cancelled, refugees are in there.'⁵⁶

Some islanders, such as Beth were paid by the Immigration Department to process asylum seekers:

I remember this massive boat that came that had about 300 people on it and it was just huge and they found five people on the boat that spoke English, and whatever other language they needed, they paid us twenty-five dollars per hour to go down and do five to six hours a night for five nights doing the initial interviews ... There was tape and they [asylum seekers] would have a number written on their arm, like a marathon number, in texta⁵⁷ and they were told that it was it was their responsibility to make sure that that number stays on their arm and they'd be in trouble if the number came off.⁵⁸

Isabella recalled her parent's involvement to process the asylum seekers:

A lot of people used to take time out of their days to go and help the police with them. My mum and dad were one of them, they'd take days off work to go and help process all of the detainees. So they [the police] would just block off the entire sports hall.⁵⁹

Interaction between islanders and asylum seekers was frequent. Sometimes islanders brought cooked food to the sports hall. Beth described how one evening after Union Day⁶⁰ she took leftover food there, which was welcomed by the one police officer on duty.⁶¹ Other islanders sought ways to entertain asylum seekers. This ranged from activities such as police car washing competitions to volley ball matches. Beth pointed out that the car washing

⁵⁴ The skate park is another name for the sports hall.

⁵⁵ Interview with Samantha.

⁵⁶ Interview with Isabella.

⁵⁷ A texta is a felt tipped marker.

⁵⁸ Interview with Beth.

⁵⁹ Interview with Isabella.

⁶⁰ Union Day is a public holiday on Christmas Island that celebrates the formation of the union.

⁶¹ Interview with Beth.

competitions were not to exploit asylum seekers but ways to alleviate their boredom.⁶² Samantha recalled a volleyball match in the sports hall where mattresses were stacked up in the sports hall to make space for the tournament. She explained that at the end of the match, the asylum seekers ‘started drumming and singing it was just wonderful!’ Isabella also remembered the volleyball matches:

If they were here for a little while, we used to set up volleyball competitions for them and certain members of the community would go and play with them and others would sit outside the doors and watch them, so it was all right.⁶³

These encounters between islanders and asylum seekers reveal that islanders welcomed asylum seekers, recognised them as strangers in need and gave them refuge. Islanders participated in processing and detaining asylum seekers, which resulted in both demarcation of difference and recognition. Localised detention arrangements were a major feature of this period, which allowed for a high level of interaction between islanders and asylum seekers. How islanders responded to asylum seekers from the perspective of being a host community, is the subject of the next section.

The Christmas Island host community

Exploring host communities globally offers an analytical framework for understanding the shaping of islander responses during this period. Jacobsen’s research on refugee host communities in developing countries examines how host communities respond to refugee influxes and absorb such flows:

Ability is distinct from willingness – a community may be structurally able to absorb a refugee influx, but it may not be willing to do so. Structural ability is determined by such variables as economic capacity and international assistance. Willingness is influenced by beliefs and attitudes about refugees, by the community’s historical experience with (and as) refugees, by the perceived permanence of the refugees.’⁶⁴

How a community perceives its ability to absorb refugees directly influences its willingness. Jacobsen explains that ‘local absorption capacity’ is

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Interview with Isabella.

⁶⁴ Jacobsen, ‘Factors influencing the policy responses’, 666.

determined by 'economic capacity and social receptiveness'.⁶⁵ These variables are constantly changing; hence community absorption is 'never static.'⁶⁶ Economic capacity relates to land availability, employment and infrastructure. Jacobsen points out that in developing countries, 'Local people are then less likely to be threatened when refugees bring resources such as agricultural skills, labor and capital.'⁶⁷ When refugees create strains on local medical and educational services, housing and employment, it potentially creates 'service breakdowns, increased hardships for local people, and local resentment towards refugees'.⁶⁸

Social receptiveness may change over time as refugees reside in a community for an extended period.⁶⁹ Kunz echoes Jacobsen, arguing that social receptiveness is a factor in host community responses. He explains: 'Monistic societies are less likely to be hospitable to people who cling to their differing cultures than pluralistic societies of broader experience.'⁷⁰ Given the multicultural and diverse nature of the Christmas Island community, Kunz's argument is apt. Two factors put forth by Jacobsen, which influence the social receptiveness of host communities and have particular significance for Christmas Island, are 'cultural meaning of refugees' and 'beliefs about refugees'.⁷¹

A community's perception of refugees is determined by what they understand a refugee to mean, and this is influenced by 'cultural, historical and religious factors'.⁷² For example, in Islam, strong traditions exist that relate to how Muslims should offer refuge or asylum to those threatened by persecution.⁷³ Friese notes that historically, hospitality was a 'religious and ethical duty' and that the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran 'demand the protection and sheltering of strangers and advise not to disregard the holy

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 667.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 668.

⁷⁰ Egon Kunz, 'Exile and resettlement: Refugee theory', *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981): 48

⁷¹ Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses', 668–70.

⁷² *ibid.*, 668.

⁷³ *ibid.*

prescription of hospitality'.⁷⁴ For some members of the Christmas Island community, particularly Malay Muslims, religious duties influenced how they responded to asylum seekers. This was the case for Eric who recalled visiting the Muslim asylum seekers in the sports hall.

I went and asked to try and do something for the detainees, asylum seekers, because they are Muslim ... I actually went there and talked to them about that and the police superintendent introduced me to them. Then I just work along with them or give them help meeting our community and give them guidance.⁷⁵

Eric explained that the asylum seekers were allowed to visit the mosque and invited to attend religious events celebrated by the island's Islamic community. A newspaper article published in 1999 reported that Muslim islanders 'demanded' that asylum seekers' meals be prepared in halal kitchens, which 'angered European restaurant owners who used the "reffero" meals to prop up their businesses during hard times'.⁷⁶ A member of the Christmas Island's Islamic Council, which was responsible for the religious needs of Muslim islanders, told the *Australian*: 'It is our religious duty to ensure that they have *halal* food, we feel guilty on their behalf if we did not do so.'⁷⁷

Eric's inclination to assist relates to Jacobsen's argument that religious beliefs about refugees influence social receptiveness. However, the notion of a 'shared religion', as discussed in Daley's study into community relations between refugees and residents in the West Midlands, United Kingdom, also offers insight into why Eric concerned himself with the asylum seekers. Daley concluded that religion enhanced cohesive relations between refugees and some local community members:

Shared religion was felt to bring different people together in the area, but only at the level of sharing of religious practices and values ... Religious values such as 'love thy neighbour', respect and care for the

⁷⁴ Heidrun Friese, 'The limits of hospitality: Political philosophy, undocumented migration and the local arena', *European Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (2010): 326.

⁷⁵ Interview with Eric.

⁷⁶ Collen Egan, 'Bad tidings', *Australian*, 11 December 1999, 21.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

poor was felt to be important in enabling people from different faiths to live peacefully together.⁷⁸

Other islanders indicated that religion played a role in how islanders responded to asylum seekers. For example, Shelley pointed out that the Malay community 'would go down and offer support or food and just try and meet the people'.⁷⁹ Isabella said, 'Because there were a lot of Afghanis, the Malays would take down things for the women and children.'⁸⁰

Jacobsen further argues that a host community's beliefs about refugees' motivations underpin the social receptiveness of host community. She explains:

Beliefs about the motivations of refugees are influenced by the community's understanding and perception of the causes of the outflow. Where there is widespread knowledge about the conditions in the sending country, and if those conditions are perceived to be an appropriate cause for flight, community sympathy will be higher than if the sending causes are unknown and misunderstood.⁸¹

Jacobsen's argument resonates when examining islanders' beliefs about asylum seekers. For some islanders, beliefs were formed or at least reshaped when they directly witnessed asylum seekers arriving on the island. As Eric noted:

I cannot remember the year, when people start to come in these boats and realise that these people were coming mostly from Iraq and I think why are all these people coming? Why they risk theirs and their family's lives? ... There is always reason for them [coming]. I can see that it is very hard for them. It's a long way and they spend so much money and also risking their life and family.⁸²

When Eric first encountered the arrival of boat people he reflected on why people might be motivated to embark on such a dangerous trip. He went on to explain:

They [boat people] are so brave and I wonder how they can get to here. I have experienced that back in the early seventies where we only

⁷⁸ Clare Daley, 'Exploring community connections: Community cohesion and refugee integration at a local level', *Community Development Journal* 44, no. 2 (2009): 164.

⁷⁹ Interview with Shelley.

⁸⁰ Interview with Isabella.

⁸¹ Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses', 670.

⁸² Interview with Eric.

travel from Christmas to Singapore. You travel on a big ship and I have experienced big waves and it is very difficult to come through here. I don't know how they managed it. For me, they were very lucky.⁸³

Eric's beliefs about asylum seekers were not only shaped through directly witnessing boat arrivals but by what Hollands refers to as 'identification' and 'imagination' that result from direct contact with asylum seekers.⁸⁴ Eric drew on his own experience of migrating across the ocean to Christmas Island when reflecting on what he thought asylum seekers might have experienced.

Directly witnessing boat arrivals enabled some islanders to contemplate what might motivate people to make the unsafe journey across the ocean. Shelley began by recalling about her own misfortune while travelling at sea and later becoming displaced on Christmas Island in 2000:

I didn't mean to come here [Christmas Island]. I got stranded here. I was working on a yacht and we were having troubles so we saw Christmas Island on the map and decided to stop here when the captain decided that it was not safe to continue on. So that's how I came to be here, I was stranded and then decided to stay.⁸⁵

Shelley said that she had only \$300 when she arrived on the island. With little money for accommodation, she squatted outside Tai Jin House until she found work and house-sitting on the island.

Speaking about her first experiences of encountering boat people, Shelley said:

I didn't really understand the focus of it then because it was the first time I had ever really been involved with the issue at all at any level so it had never been in my face before. So for me I didn't really know what was happening then ... It wasn't like bang I was onto to it ... I just started thinking where are all these people coming from and what is motivating them to do this ... I guess you just start thinking about it all rather than what it means for the island, which is how a lot of people saw it, 'Who are these people and what are they doing here?' Just the immediate influence it has on your life here.⁸⁶

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Marlie Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance: The impact of direct contact with refugees on Dutch hosts', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (2001): 295–314.

⁸⁵ Interview with Shelley.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

In Hollands' research in the Netherlands, the theme of 'constructed images' and its consequences, 'differentiated views' and at times 'disillusionment' is noteworthy. Constructed images of refugees contribute to beliefs about refugees, and consequently the level of social receptiveness. Hollands' participants' beliefs about refugees changed when their own constructed images were challenged after direct contact. For example, she notes that a number of participants were 'surprised' that refugees were often from middle to upper class societies, were educated or had professional backgrounds.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Hollands' participants often remarked that they found refugees to be 'not unlike "us"' or they were 'just like us' but had gone through extraordinary experiences.⁸⁸ A similar sentiment was expressed by Owen, 'Most of them that turned up here would be just your everyday people from these countries that weren't as well off as us ... they were just your everyday run of the mill people who wanted a better life.'⁸⁹ Beth's comments paralleled with Hollands' findings that refugees were 'not unlike us':

Here, you hear people stories ... watching the kids, their faces, with big smiles waving at us. You would have to be the worst person not to see that and think that's a person they've got the same hopes as me and that's where detention is really wrong because you are limiting the opportunities for people to connect with another.⁹⁰

Not all islanders had positive beliefs about asylum seekers. As Jacobsen explains, 'Beliefs about the motivations of refugees influence the community's receptiveness in the same way that in industrialised societies the notion of the 'deserving poor' creates support for welfare policies.'⁹¹ Where host communities believe that refugees have come for opportunistic reasons, such as economic rather than escaping persecution, it is less likely hosts will be sympathetic. On the other hand, if the host community believes that refugees' lives are genuinely under threat, they are more likely to be 'welcomed and assisted'.⁹² Similarly, Hollands found that when some participants had direct

⁸⁷ Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance', 306.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 304.

⁸⁹ Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion'.

⁹⁰ Interview with Beth.

⁹¹ Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses', 670.

⁹² *ibid.*

contact with refugees, it led to 'disappointment and specific prejudices'.⁹³ For example, one of her participants explained that he had always thought of refugees as poor:

His image of refugees was generally based on the portrayal in the media of 'starving Ethiopians and the like'. To his surprise, many of the refugees he met had a middle class or elite background. He concluded from his observation that the '*real* refugees, the people who *really* need help', were not able to get to Europe.⁹⁴

Emily's comments about asylum seekers resonate. When speaking about a group of Iraqi asylum seekers, she explained:

It was pretty horrible for them [being in the sports hall] but at the same time some groups of people were very demanding and wanted bottled water ... they complained that it [the food] was poor peoples' food. Some of them were quite well off and I didn't feel pity for that group of people at all because they were just abusing the system ... If people are genuine refugees then okay, but I don't like when people come and abuse the system.⁹⁵

Unlike Beth or Samantha who had direct contact with asylum seekers, Emily was never involved in offering assistance or the processing of asylum seekers. During the interview, she used the word 'genuine refugee' and when asked what this meant, she responded:

If they really are escaping and they don't have anything, you know some of these people have a lot ... seems like they have a lot of money and come here very demanding and if you were genuine and really needed help you would be thankful for anything ... They should be thankful just to be alive. Because there's lots of people ... in camps who can't get anything, that's the ones I feel sorry for.⁹⁶

Journalist, Colleen Egan who visited Christmas Island in 1999 reported negative responses among some members of the island community:

Complaints are mounting over 'favourable treatment' for seemingly well-off Iraqis and Iranians ... Stories about attempted bribes, arrogance and fussiness among the Middle Easterners who arrive in

⁹³ Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance', 306.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 307.

⁹⁵ Interview with Emily, Christmas Island, 11 March 2009.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

designer clothes on specially fitted boats are circulating in pubs and workplaces.⁹⁷

Negative sentiments reflected in Egan's article were evident during an interview with Mason, who worked as a stevedore during the boat arrivals. He recounted that asylum seekers were demanding and had ungrateful attitudes. He said:

A refugee boat sank at the jetty here. And what the [Iraqi] men did, this is extraordinary, the men did not bother to rescue the women and children. They just went to shore by themselves, not with their family ... They were so selfish. They wouldn't want to help any other person and not only that, when they came to shore ... they were so rude and arrogant. They thought they could buy their way out with money.⁹⁸

The perceived notion that asylum seekers were not genuine if they were wealthy surfaced during Mason's interview:

To me the Iraqis were not genuine refugees. As far as I know, they had US bills, gold, and everything. They were well dressed and clothed and everything. The Afghani ... They had nothing, I guess most of the time they had paid their way to Indonesia or whatever. They lost everything. They just were trying to go to mainland and get some better prospects of living.⁹⁹

Hollands maintains that some participants in her study became disillusioned when refugees did not match the constructed image they had formed of refugees. She explains that some participants did not have the 'relevant knowledge' about refugees, such as they can be financially well off, which resulted in disappointment. Consequently, with no 'alternative framework' to make sense of their observations this led to 'prejudice' and the perception that 'rich refugees may be potentially bogus'.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

From 1997 to 2001, islanders encountered asylum seekers from mainly Afghanistan and Iraq who had fled the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime. When these asylum seekers arrived on Christmas Island, a localised

⁹⁷ Collen Egan, 'Bad tidings on Christmas', *Australian*, 21.

⁹⁸ Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion'.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance', 307.

approach to detention took place. Islanders were involved in the reception, processing and welfare of asylum seekers. This period was characterised by Christmas Island becoming a host community for asylum seekers, where spontaneous acts of hospitality took place.

During this period, proximity to asylum seekers – physical, moral or narrative in form – allowed for islanders to reflect on asylum seeker journeys and often precipitated a response. From a physical perspective, islanders witnessed asylum seekers arriving on Christmas Island and their subsequent detention in the sports hall. Islanders' involvement with the reception and processing of asylum seekers, led to narrative proximity shaping islander responses. Islanders heard first-hand stories about asylum seekers' plights. Hearing these stories generated islander responses that mostly centred on sympathy and compassion for asylum seekers. The way in which islanders felt a sense of responsibility for those that arrived demonstrated moral proximity. They sought ways to welcome the asylum seeker stranger and were socially receptive to the presence of asylum seekers. These different forms of proximity led to islanders forming their own beliefs about asylum seekers, which at times were varied and largely depended on the level of interaction islanders had with asylum seekers. Furthermore, islanders' own experiences and religion informed these beliefs and responses accordingly.

Opportunities for islanders to treat asylum seekers in a spirit of hospitality were soon relegated to the past after the Howard Government prevented those on board the *Tampa* from disembarking at Christmas Island. Islander responses to the government's actions and a community of protest are the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Everything changed after Tampa’

Today Tai Jin House is a tranquil place. The only sounds are the flutter of frangipanis falling to the ground and birdcalls echoing from the jungle. Flying Fish Cove is visible below. The pristine ocean sparkles with snorkellers while fishermen throw their lines from the jetty. During the Tampa affair in 2001, the Cove and Tai Jin House were far from peaceful. A military incursion took place on the island and the Special Air Services (SAS) set up camp at Tai Jin House. The Australian Government designated island no-go zones and closed the jetty, and Tai Jin House was blockaded from the public. Meanwhile, 300 islanders came together for a protest at the Cove. They chanted, ‘Let them land’ in anger over the Howard Government’s treatment of the 438 asylum seekers on board the MV *Tampa*.

The Tampa affair is a well-known event in Australia’s political and immigration history. The Howard Government’s 2001 election campaign statement, ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’, signified how asylum seekers were to become a focus in Australian politics to an extent not previously experienced.¹ While mainland Australians watched the Tampa debacle unfold from media reports and political debate, islanders witnessed the event unfold first hand.

The first section of the chapter discusses the Tampa affair. Here, an overview of this historical event is provided by drawing on media articles and academic literature. The narrative of how this event played out on the island is recounted from interview material and Christmas Island community notices. In the second section, the militarisation of Christmas Island during the Tampa affair is discussed. Here, Tanji’s ‘community of protest’ is drawn on as a framework for understanding.² The third section addresses islanders’ experiences of bearing witness to asylum seekers. In the final section, the

¹ John Howard, Election Speech, Sydney, 28 October 2001, accessed 23 July 2014, <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard>.

² Miyume Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

excision of Christmas Island from the migration zone³ is discussed. Islander responses to this policy and the lack of government consultation with the local community are also looked at.

The Tampa affair on Christmas Island

The Tampa affair began on 26 August 2001, when the *Palapa 1*, an Indonesian fishing vessel carrying 438 mainly Afghan asylum seekers, became stranded in international waters 140 kilometres off the coast of Christmas Island. The *Palapa* faced treacherous sea conditions, with its passengers and crew in great danger.⁴ The Australian Rescue Control Centre (RCC) alerted Indonesian authorities to the boat, but they failed to take action.⁵ When the RCC put out a mayday call for the distressed boat, the MV *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter owned by the Wilhelmsen shipping company, responded. Twenty-seven crew were on board the *Tampa*, which was licensed to carry 40 people. The *Tampa*'s captain, Arne Rinnan, was guided by an Australian Customs aircraft to the *Palapa*.⁶ Rinnan and his crew performed a rescue operation and brought all the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*'s deck.

Ali, a refugee rescued by the *Tampa*, gave a first-hand account of the rescue. He explained that the ordeal began when the *Palapa* experienced a breakdown and the boat filled with water. The asylum seekers on board were crying, dehydrated and had given up hope of being saved. He believed his death was imminent. On the fourth day at sea, in the early hours of the morning, the *Palapa*'s passengers saw a plane. Using oil from the engine, asylum seekers painted 'SOS' on a woman's white headscarf and waved it at the plane. Around midday, asylum seekers sitting on the boat's roof saw a large red ship, the MV *Tampa*, heading towards them. The *Tampa*'s crew rescued the *Palapa*'s passengers one by one, which Ali described as 'a dangerous task in two metre high waves'.⁷ *Tampa*'s first officer, Christian Maltau, later

³ The migration zone is the area where non-citizens must arrive with a visa to remain.

⁴ Peter Mares, 'Reassessing the Tampa', in *Yearning to Breathe Free: Seeking Asylum in Australia*, eds Dean Lusher and Nick Haslam (Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press, 2007), 52.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Ernst Willheim, 'MV Tampa: The Australian response', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 15, no. 2 (2003): 160.

⁷ Email correspondence from Ali to Dimasi, 26 March 2011.

described the *Tampa*'s deck as a 'virtual refugee camp', with the *Palapa*'s passengers accommodated among the shipping containers.⁸

Given that the *Palapa* had departed from Indonesia, Captain Rinnan, headed towards Indonesia's nearest port. However, the *Tampa* changed direction when five asylum seeker men, Rinnan described as 'behaving in a very aggravated and excited manner', demanded that he take them to Christmas Island.⁹ Under pressure, Rinnan headed for Christmas Island, which was only four hours away.

On 27 August, the day after the rescue, the Australian Government refused the *Tampa* entry to Christmas Island. Captain Rinnan was threatened by Australian authorities with people-smuggling charges if the asylum seekers disembarked on Christmas Island, and was instructed to head to Indonesia.¹⁰ On the same day, Australian authorities closed Christmas Island's port and no boats were allowed to leave from Christmas Island.¹¹ Bill Taylor, island administrator, informed local residents by issuing a community bulletin notifying them of the closure.¹² Marr and Wilkinson refer to the impact this had on the media obtaining information:

Canberra had gagged local officials and closed Flying Fish Cove. Journalists now pouring into The Settlement on flights from Jakarta and Perth found it impossible to take a boat out to Tampa. Once the SAS was on board, Canberra would decree anything to do with the Tampa involved 'operational security' ... No cameraman would get close enough to the Tampa to put a human face on this story. The icon of the scandal was to be a red-hulled ship on a blue sea photographed through heat haze by a very long lens.¹³

Rinnan did not land on Christmas Island and instead remained 12 nautical miles from the exclusion zone.¹⁴ He reported concerns over the medical condition of the asylum seekers, which the Norwegian Embassy then relayed

⁸ 'Tampa captain defends action', *ABC Lateline*, 6 September 2001, accessed 10 February 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2001/s360253.htm>.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Willheim, 'MV Tampa', 160–1.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 161.

¹² Bill Taylor, 'Bulletin: Port closure', *Christmas Island Administration*, no. 62/01, 29 August 2001.

¹³ David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 80.

¹⁴ Mares, 'Reassessing the Tampa', 53.

to the Australian Government, making clear that this was a humanitarian emergency with the possibility of people dying.¹⁵ The situation became even more dire when some male asylum seekers began a hunger strike. Ramesh Irongar, the *Tampa*'s first radio officer reported that asylum seekers threatened that if they did not go to Christmas Island they would jump overboard, 'go crazy', or there would be a riot.¹⁶

The same day the Christmas Island port closed, Prime Minister John Howard held a press conference. He declared that the *Tampa* was prohibited from entering Australian waters and this was a 'matter of international law' that should be 'resolved between the government of Indonesia and the government of Norway'.¹⁷ Norway's Foreign Minister Thorbjorn Jagland said that Australia's response was 'inhumane and unacceptable'.¹⁸ He argued:

The Norwegian vessel was requested by Australian search and rescue authority to assist this ship in distress and an Australian aircraft guided Norwegian ship to this vessel in distress and, as we see it, it's absolutely clear that Australia's responsibility continue[s] to exist because this is an Australian-led operation and when the Norwegian ship asked for assistance, they are obliged to give assistance to the Norwegian ship and allow the Norwegian ship into its territorial water.¹⁹

Indonesia's response to Australia during the *Tampa* crisis created tensions. Diplomatic relations deteriorated, with the Indonesian government accusing Australia of 'megaphone diplomacy', implying that Australia was only negotiating with Indonesia through media statements rather than direct consultation.²⁰ Furthermore, Australia's failure to consult with Indonesia before publicly announcing that it considered the matter to be an issue

¹⁵ Willheim, 'MV Tampa', 161.

¹⁶ Ramesh Irongar, 'Refugees begin hunger strike on Tampa', *AM Program*, 28 August 2001, accessed 18 September 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s353412.htm>.

¹⁷ 'Norway pressures Australia over refugee ship', *BBC News*, 27 August 2001, accessed 16 February 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1511202.stm>.

¹⁸ Kerry O'Brien, 'Tampa action "inhumane": Norway', *7.30 Report*, 29 August 2001, accessed 14 September 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2001/s354752.htm>.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia's Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of Tampa* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002), 239.

between Norway and Indonesia soured relations between Indonesia and Australia.²¹

On 28 August, representatives from Christmas Island's Shire Council, Islamic Council of Christmas Island, Chinese Literary Association of Christmas Island, the Union of Christmas Island Workers, and Christmas Island's Women's Association came together at the office of the Union of Christmas Island Workers to discuss the Tampa crisis. They prepared a media statement, which voiced their support for the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*:

Our community expresses sympathy for those who come to Christmas Island seeking a safe haven from war, famine and oppressive regimes in their countries of origin. We call upon the Commonwealth of Australia to enter international agreements aimed at providing an orderly system of accommodating asylum seekers and refugees ... We, the elected representatives of our community, call on the Prime Minister to order the opening of our port to the Norwegian Vessel, the *Tampa*, to allow the asylum-seekers to land on our island.²²

The community representatives faxed the statement to the *Tampa* and included a special message for the captain, crew and asylum seekers on board:

The elected representatives of the people of Christmas Island are ashamed of the actions of the Prime Minister of our country. We hope our statement today will bring a speedy conclusion to your dilemma and that you will be allowed to land on our island without further delay.²³

The Australian Government response

On 29 August, after making several distress calls to the Australian Government for help, Rinnan defied Australia's orders and began heading towards Christmas Island, before remaining four nautical miles from Flying Fish Cove.²⁴ By this stage, the Howard Government had sent Defence personnel and medical supplies to the island. Howard told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *AM Program*, 'We've been working

²¹ Grant Holloway, 'Boatpeople top of agenda for Indonesia talks', CNN, 27 November 2001, accessed 21 September 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/auspac/11/26/aust.indon.refugees/index.html>.

²² 'Statement from Christmas Island community organisations and shire councillors regarding asylum-seekers seeking refuge on Christmas Island', *Islander*, 28 August 2001, 4.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Willheim, 'MV Tampa', 161.

furiously over the last 36 hours to get helicopters to Christmas Island and to be in a position to provide this emergency relief.’²⁵ Later that day, Howard told the House of Representatives that Australia’s foreign minister had spoken with the Norwegian foreign minister that morning and he made it clear that the *Tampa* was not to enter Australian territorial waters; otherwise ‘appropriate action would be taken to stop and board the ship’ and that ‘entry into Australian territorial waters would be a breach of international law.’²⁶ He said that Australia would take whatever action was necessary to stop the *Tampa* from moving into or further into Australian territorial waters.’²⁷ The House of Representatives heard Howard’s reasoning behind the SAS troops boarding *Tampa*:

The government was left with no alternative but to instruct the Chief of the Australian Defence Force to arrange for Defence personnel to board and secure the vessel. My advice is that units of the Special Air Service under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Gus Gilmore executed this instruction over an hour ago and that the ship is now in the control of the SAS. We have subsequently been advised by the ship’s captain, in contradiction of earlier advice given, that the reason he decided to enter Australian territorial waters was that a spokesman for the survivors of the Indonesian vessel had indicated that they would begin jumping overboard if medical assistance was not provided quickly ... Every nation has the right to effectively control its borders and to decide who comes here and under what circumstances, and Australia has no intention of surrendering or compromising that right.²⁸

Mohammad, an Afghan asylum seeker who was on board the *Tampa*, later described the experience of when the SAS boarded the vessel:

The Australian Special Forces, fully alert, with their guns ready on their hands, and loud voices on their radios boarded the Tampa ... In a few minutes there were soldiers everywhere ... Some of us, including the women and children were so scared that they could not dare to look at the soldiers ... Some of us who dared to speak with the soldiers

²⁵ Howard, John, ‘PM discusses diplomatic standoff’, *AM Program*, 29 August 2001.

²⁶ John Howard, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, House of Representatives, 29 August 2001, 30516.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, 30516–17.

were told to wait for a decision, which would be made by high-level authorities of Australia. Everything was dark and ambiguous.²⁹

Crew on board the *Tampa* were shocked by the arrival of the SAS and condemned the Australian Government for taking such action.³⁰ Crew who witnessed the SAS board the vessel reported fear among the asylum seekers. One crewman said, 'A lot of them [asylum seekers] were screaming they were going to be shot or arrested. Some looked as if they were going to jump overboard as the uniformed troops got closer.'³¹ Once the SAS boarded, Captain Rinnan turned off the *Tampa*'s engine and refused to move from Australian waters.³²

On 31 August, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Australian Red Cross landed on the island. They arrived with half a tonne of medical supplies to conduct an emergency medical relief operation to assist those board *Tampa*.³³ Dr Peter Davoren from the Doctors Reform Society, which represents hundreds of doctors around Australia, wrote to the Howard Government seeking permission to examine the Tampa refugees, which was refused. He said, 'We feel that the treatment of leaving these people on our door-step and saying "Go away. Go somewhere else", is really turning away people in great need and we consider that that's an unreasonable thing to do.'³⁴ In response, Howard's spokesperson said, 'The medical condition of the attempted illegal immigrants has been assessed and there's none requiring medical evacuation, so I don't really think there's a potential problem out there.'³⁵ While Médecins Sans Frontières and the Australian Red Cross never carried out their emergency relief operation, they publicly thanked the Christmas Island community for their hospitality. In a public notice in the *Islander* Médecins Sans Frontières wrote: 'Médecins Sans Frontières takes this opportunity to thank the community of Christmas Island for their friendship, support and

²⁹ Mohammad, letter to Kate Durham, 29 June 2002. Mohammad wrote a series of letters while he was detained on Nauru for two years.

³⁰ Daniel McGrory and Vanda Carson, 'Refugee ship captain defies SAS takeover', *The Times*, 30 August 2001, 13.

³¹ McGrory and Carson, 'Refugee ship captain', 13.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Darren Gray and Kerry Taylor, 'Help not required, PM tells voluntary medical teams', *Age*, 1 September 2001, 4.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

goodwill towards us during the refugee crisis on the MV Tampa.’³⁶ The Australian Red Cross published a similar notice, which stated, ‘We would like to extend our sincerest thanks to the people of Christmas Island. Your generosity, compassion, help and hospitality while we were on our assessment mission here will be long remembered.’³⁷

Let them land

On 31 August, islanders staged a demonstration on the island. Approximately 300 local residents came together at the Cove, where they chanted, ‘Let them land.’³⁸ They also protested over the closure of the port. No longer could residents go fishing, nor could local diving operators operate their businesses. Local boat owners attempted to launch their boats into the water but they were stopped by police.³⁹ Journalist Catharine Munro, who was on the island, reported: ‘One fisherman also dragged his outboard dinghy into the water and sped off towards the Tampa but was forced to return to shore by a police boat.’⁴⁰ During the protest, a procession of Christmas Island children dressed in Islamic clothing held signs stating, ‘I Want Fish for Dinner’ and ‘Save Our Little Brothers and Sisters’. Meanwhile, two residents had ‘Let them land’ written on their backs and attempted to launch their kayaks into the water before being intercepted by local police.⁴¹ The dual nature of the protest was captured by Beth:

There were two protests going on at the same time but the community came together for it. There was the business people saying let us launch our damn boats in the Cove, you know Shorefire⁴² and the divers and things like that and then there was the community group saying, like Lin had, ‘Let them land’ written on her midriff. And I’ll never forget Richard. In those days you couldn’t just go and buy a piece of cardboard to write a sign on it, we were hunter gatherers. Richard had his sign written on a washing machine lid ... And yes

³⁶ Médecins Sans Frontières, ‘Letters to the editor’, *Islander*, 14 September 2001, 10.

³⁷ Australian Red Cross, ‘Letters to the editor: A big thank you to all the Christmas Islanders from the Australian Red Cross’, *Islander*, 14 September 2001, 10.

³⁸ Barbie Dutter, ‘On Christmas Island, the cry is compassion’, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 2001, 17.

³⁹ Catharine Munro, ‘Christmas Island residents stage protest at Tampa rejection’, Australian Associated Press, 2 September 2001.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Shorefire is a local business that supplies the island with fresh fish and operates fishing tours.

people were protesting about different things. It was Polly, Pamela who made lots of shirts, these old op-shop shirts that people scribbled on in texta and were wearing shirts with things like, 'let them land' and 'be fair'.⁴³

In early September, the Tampa affair came to the end with the introduction of the 'Pacific Solution'. Alexander Downer, Australia's foreign minister, negotiated with New Zealand and Nauru and both countries agreed to assist. The Australian Government made an agreement with the New Zealand Government to process and resettle 150 asylum seekers off the *Tampa*, comprising of family groups, women and children. New Zealand's only request was that Australia paid the cost of flying the asylum seekers to Auckland.⁴⁴ In exchange for taking asylum seekers, Australia promised Nauru \$30 million in aid and development.⁴⁵ Australia paid to establish a detention centre on Nauru, along with all associated costs for detaining people.⁴⁶ It was later found by Oxfam that the detention of asylum seekers on Nauru from 2001 to 2007 cost over \$1 billion.⁴⁷

On 3 September, the *Tampa* asylum seekers were transferred to the HMAS *Manoora*. Here, they awaited their fate as a legal challenge was mounted in the High Court to bring the asylum seekers to Australia; which was unsuccessful.⁴⁸ On 17 September, the Tampa asylum seekers arrived on Nauru along with another 277 asylum seekers whose boat, the *Aceng*, was intercepted by the Australian Navy.⁴⁹ Future asylum seekers continued to be taken to Nauru and also Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where an agreement was reached with PNG to take asylum seekers in exchange for \$1 million to build a detention centre.⁵⁰ The United Nations High Commissioner

⁴³ Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁴⁴ Marr and Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, 109.

⁴⁵ Mary Crock, Ben Saul and Azadeh Dastyari, *Future Seekers II: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia* (Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press, 2006): 123.

⁴⁶ Chantal Bostock, 'The international legal obligations owed to the asylum seekers on the MV Tampa', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 14, no. 2 and 3 (2002): 281.

⁴⁷ David Corlett, 'Border protection comes at too high a price', *Age*, 4 September 2007, accessed 2 September 2014, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/border-protection-comes-at-too-high-a-price/2007/09/03/1188783152824.html?page=fullpage>.

⁴⁸ Robert Manne and David Corlett, 'Sending them home: Refugees and the new politics of indifference', *Quarterly Essay* 13 (2004): 13.

⁴⁹ Kirsten Lawson, 'Ruddock ready to offload refugees after win', *Canberra Times*, 18 September 2001, 10.

⁵⁰ Crock, Saul and Dastyari, *Future Seekers II*, 125.

for Refugees assessed the claims of those who were from the *Tampa* and *Aceng*. All subsequent asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus were processed by the Australian Government.⁵¹

Islanders recalled their shock when they learned that the Australian Government had denied the Tampa asylum seekers a safe landing. Paul Reed, a local resident who was interviewed by the ABC prior to the SAS boarding the Tampa said:

I think most people think they [Tampa asylum seekers] should come in ... They've been sat out there for two-and-a-half days now. It's not very fair. I mean I think the tents and everything have already been put up because we knew they were coming anyway, so the tents are all up and all the sports ovals are ready for them.⁵²

Islanders envisaged that those on board Tampa would come ashore like all other arrivals. For example, Isabella explained: 'We've had people going in and out for years and it hadn't really affected us until then, until this happened. It was a bit of a surprise to me that the government said "No you are not getting off the boat," because they always had.'⁵³ Some islanders recalled that in the early stages of the Tampa affair that they thought it would be over very quickly. Beth explained how she tried to dissuade a documentary team from coming to the island: 'Don't waste your money, it will all be over within 24 hours, they have to let them land.' She recalled, 'I think everybody [islanders] believed that they [the government] would let them land and it didn't happen.'⁵⁴

Instead of the asylum seekers coming ashore and customary acts of hospitality taking place as they had for the Afghani and Iraqis asylum seekers (see Chapter Four), islanders witnessed the militarisation of Christmas Island.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 123.

⁵² Leigh Sales, 'Christmas Island prepares for asylum seekers', *PM Program*, accessed 8 October 2013, 29 August 2001, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s354585.htm>.

⁵³ Interview with Isabella, Christmas Island, 19 February 2009.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview with Beth.

The militarisation of Christmas Island

The Howard Government's use of Australia's armed forces during the Tampa affair was confronting for many local island residents. A community statement released during Tampa stated:

Today we have witnessed a major build of military forces on the island, including the SAS. We abhor this action. It is action which would not have been necessary if the asylum seekers had been landed on Christmas Island as usual.⁵⁵

Islanders frequently adopted words such as 'invasion' and 'war' when describing the Tampa affair. Marcus recollected:

It was like something you have never seen ... The SAS came like you couldn't believe it. It was like a bloody invasion. The airport up there with Hercs⁵⁶ coming and going. It was like LA International Airport. Guys running around getting all the gear off. I supplied trucks all that sort of stuff to cart the people around and buses to run them around. It was just like a procession of aeroplanes coming in and out.⁵⁷

Marcus's comment echoed with what Howard told ABC's *AM Program* during Tampa: 'We've been working furiously over the last thirty-six hours to get helicopters to Christmas Island.'⁵⁸ The militarisation of the island was also captured by Marr and Wilkinson: 'The island transformed into an armed camp. The army's Hercules transports brought medical and food supplies, ocean-going inflatable zodiacs, an Iroquois helicopter (in pieces) and 120 SAS soldiers to the island.'⁵⁹

The militarisation of Christmas Island dominated Abidin's recollection of the Tampa affair:

They [the SAS] bloody come up with full guards, vests, [and] helmets. It scares the community here. Ok fine, you are the Mortal Combat ⁶⁰or whatever, but not around here, we are not allowed guns around here ... They were coming on to the jetty with masks ... It's bull ... The government handled the Tampa, the refugees, like they were really

⁵⁵ 'Statement from Christmas Island community organisations and shire councillors regarding asylum seekers seeking refuge on Christmas Island', *Islander*, 28 August 2001, 4.

⁵⁶ Marcus is referring to 'Hercules', a military aircraft.

⁵⁷ Interview with Marcus, Christmas Island, 19 September 2008.

⁵⁸ *AM Program*, 29 August 2001, cited in David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 80.

⁵⁹ Marr and Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, 80.

⁶⁰ Mortal Kombat is a video game featuring martial arts and fighting.

terrorists when the SAS got up fitted with machine guns. That should not have been shown to the community. It was like we were in for a riot.⁶¹

During the Tampa affair, Jasni worked as a stevedore. He took a barge out to the MV *Tampa* so that the navy could transfer the asylum seekers from the MV *Tampa* to the HMAS *Manoora*. Like Abidin, he recalled the deployment of military troops to the island:

The main thing I was surprised [by was] when I saw this SAS people ... The closest I get to the Tampa was helping the SAS to get on board the ship ... You see all these poor people ... To me those people they were probably not scared about these guns or whatever because in their home it is just like a playground with guns. To us, in my life, I never see a gun, not a shotgun or automatic ... I could even reach my hand to the weapons they bring in, it's scary.⁶²

Given that the Kampong is located opposite the Cove, its residents felt the impact of the military's presence. Eric, who lived in the Kampong during Tampa, described the disruption of island life:

We are not against anyone but the army and navy that came in. It was like we had been invaded by this group of armed personnel and we actually never had people armed running along this area [the Kampong]. We were told that we can't do this, that and whatever and that's not right ... When looking at the asylum seekers, it's very frustrating. It could have been a short ordeal, if the government would say 'ok, just bring them ashore and process them.' But they didn't ... We cannot live our daily life and do everyday activity.⁶³

In support of those on board *Tampa*, Beth placed a sheet across her roof with the words 'Welcome Tampa asylum seekers' painted across it for those flying the military helicopters to see. Speaking of the Tampa affair, she said:

A lot of police came up and my biggest, one of my biggest, things about Tampa was that guns are illegal on Christmas Island you are not allowed to have firearms so the police don't carry them. They have them locked in the cupboard but they don't carry them and people are not allowed to have guns. Also we don't have helicopters here. During Tampa it was like waking up in a Vietnam War movie. There were helicopters going all the time all over the place. There were troops in

⁶¹ Interview with Abidin, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁶² Interview with Jasni, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁶³ Interview with Eric, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

camouflage gear running with guns over their shoulders in formation running down the road going 'hah hah' [marching sound]. And they bought over, they flew in Hercules, their own transport, big cars and it [Christmas Island] turned into this military camp.⁶⁴

Shelley recalled the secret nature of the military operation:

The riot gear was a big factor, a bit unexpected, but also just clandestine sort of nature of it ... And just the blocking, no one was allowed to be at the Cove and just the whole military taking control of the island and that feeling.⁶⁵

Anthony also spoke of the military presence:

You don't treat people like that. The army is only used for war so it scares people. You go in [use] the army to protect your country, this is an immigration problem ... You could see the helicopter everyday coming to Buck House⁶⁶. We were not allowed to go to Buck House because they set up a headquarters, army people there. It's just not necessary.⁶⁷

Christmas Island's history is characterised by government domination and a continuum of community protests. Militarisation is another example of islanders having minimal control over the government's actions. As islanders were unable to influence the government's decisions during the Tampa affair, they responded by holding a protest.

Community of protest

Christmas Island is not the only place where residents have protested over militarisation in their community. In Okinawa, South Japan, residents have long struggled with marginalisation and US military occupation since 1945. When examining islanders' public outcry during the Tampa affair, Okinawa provides insight, since its history is dominated by waves of protests by local residents. These protests have led Tanji to define Okinawa as a 'community of protest', where people from various backgrounds unite together. Tanji explains, 'Many voices of Okinawan protest are bound informally by common values, shared experiences, and collective memories that lend

⁶⁴ Interview with Beth.

⁶⁵ Interview with Shelley, Christmas Island, 25 February 2009.

⁶⁶ Buck House is another name for Tai Jin House.

⁶⁷ Interview with Anthony, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

themselves to the ideas of a continuous struggle and one people.⁶⁸ Key events throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century have 'contributed to and reinforced the making of the history of Okinawa's mistreatment and marginalization'.⁶⁹ Similar to Okinawa, Christmas Island's own history has been punctuated by struggles with its own government.

Islanders' own history of marginalisation became an important resource during the Tampa protest. Furthermore, islanders made clear that a common bond existed between them and the asylum seekers, grounded in a common experience of marginalisation. This shared struggle is illustrated in the following community statement:

Our compassion, for these asylum seekers trapped on the Tampa by our Government's action arises from our own experiences and our basic concern for the application of humanitarian values. Many Christmas Islanders have lived the experience of a racist, colonial regime on Christmas Island ... We have fought for social justice and succeeded in smashing many of the shackles of the past racist, colonial regime.⁷⁰

The fusion of islanders' experiences of marginalisation with the plight of asylum seekers was exemplified by Lola. She explained that she attended the protest in solidarity with the Tampa asylum seekers because 'We are all refugees.' While she was not a refugee in the Refugee Convention definition sense, her own experiences informed her responses:

We do a demonstration down in the Kampong because we wanted them to stay here. We were saying that we were refugee as well so we know enough. We know how they feel in their own country and when they risk their life to come over.⁷¹

In Nash and Bell's interview with Fraser, she argues that solidarity is underpinned by three 'supports', which are subjective, objective or communicative.⁷² Subjective supports refer to solidarity based on 'sensed affinity and posited similarity'. Objective supports are framed around 'casual

⁶⁸ Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle*, 6.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁰ 'Statement from Christmas Island community organisations and shire councillors regarding asylum seekers seeking refuge on Christmas Island', *Islander*, 28 August 2001, 4.

⁷¹ Interview with Lola, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁷² Kate Nash and Vikki Bell, 'The politics of framing: An interview with Nancy Fraser', *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 4 (2007): 79.

interdependence or mutual vulnerability', which leads to a shared interest. While communicative supports are about the shared experience of participating in political practice such as participating in a common public argument.⁷³ For Lola, subjective support characterised the solidarity she had with the Tampa asylum seekers:

I had sympathy for them because we are also refugee. I come from Malaysia when I come here I was also refugee and the treatment was awful. We not allowed to go to the swimming pool near the post office because it belong to CI Club, we not allowed to go to Rumah Tinggi⁷⁴ because we are Asian, we not allowed to stay in Silver City⁷⁵ because we're Asian. We were not allowed to go a lot of places, restricted because we are Asian. CI Club we not allowed to join golf club, football club ... It's completely different now. The feeling for me is that the way we were treated [was] as the state of a refugee.⁷⁶

Islander solidarity with asylum seekers was central to the Tampa protest. Moulin's 'borders of solidarity' adds insight to the Christmas Island case study.⁷⁷ In 2004, Latin American countries came together to devise a multilateral plan of action to improve the reception and protection of refugees in the Tri-Border area between Peru, Brazil and Columbia.⁷⁸ This dialogue advanced the idea of 'borders of solidarity' whereby institutions and actors would come together to improve humanitarian efforts and governance of refugees, and seek ways to deal with sharing the burden of refugees.⁷⁹ Moulin argues that within this border zone three types of solidarity exist: managerial, faith-based and autonomous. Managerial solidarity refers to enhancing refugee protection. It operates by defining who are refugees as opposed to citizens, and is 'connected to strategies of control and discipline, that can improve the living conditions of refugees'.⁸⁰ Faith-based solidarity is framed around a sense of belonging and can be either 'localized' or a 'universalistic basis'.⁸¹ This aspect of solidarity refers to either small groups who share 'a

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Rumah Tinggi is a restaurant.

⁷⁵ Silver City is a local neighbourhood.

⁷⁶ Interview with Lola.

⁷⁷ Carolina Moulin, 'Borders of solidarity: Life in displacement in the Amazon Tri-Border Region', *Refuge* 26, no. 2 (2009): 41–54.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 51.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

particular identity' or 'social position' or can consider 'broader social contexts such as those based on claims over humanity'.⁸² This type of solidarity is often evident among religious non-governmental organisations. While this form denotes a 'common origin', it does so by creating an 'other' who is much worse off and in need of 'moral and social rescuing'.⁸³ Autonomous solidarity relates to the sharing or advocating of common goals among individuals or groups 'without having to resort to a common denominator beyond difference'.⁸⁴ Moulin cites the No Borders approach as an example of autonomous solidarity, with the public sphere being about 'indistinction' and 'categorical identities' becoming irrelevant.⁸⁵

Faith-based solidarity is evident in the Christmas Island case study. A Reuters media report, 'Christmas Island Muslims pray for boat people' noted the local imam, Mohammad Nahwari's concern that the Tampa asylum seekers' religious needs were not being met, 'I can see the refugee ship from my mosque ... In Islamic law you must be in a mosque on Friday. They [the boat people] should be in a mosque today. It will be difficult for them to have midday prayer on the ship.'⁸⁶ Faith-based solidarity parallels with what Palmer defines as 'cultural proximity', which is derived from her work on Islamic non-government organisations and Rohingya refugees.⁸⁷ She argues that cultural proximity in this sense refers to the concept of *umma*, which is the universalistic belonging of Muslim followers through *dar al-Islam* (dominion of Islam). It is within this cultural proximity idea, 'the symbolic sense of community in the *umma* also exists between Muslim actors in the aid process' between Muslim organisations and Muslims in need of help.⁸⁸ On Christmas Island, this is also the case where Muslim islanders believe that it is their religious duty to assist Muslim asylum seekers.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Jason Reed, 'Christmas Island Muslims pray for boat people', Reuters, 31 August 2001.

⁸⁷ Victoria Palmer, 'Analysing cultural proximity: Islamic relief worldwide and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh', *Development in Practice* 21, no. 1 (2011): 96–108.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 98.

No-go zones

Community protests during the Tampa affair were not only about the rights of asylum seekers but about islanders being denied free movement and access after certain parts of the island were designated as prohibited zones. Islanders described how some public sites were inaccessible, such as Tai Jin House and the jetty. Discontent over being prohibited entry led to interference with government signage designating 'no-go' zones. In a bulletin issued by the island administrator, it warned residents:

Earlier this week, the port of Christmas Island was closed until further notice. Barriers and signs have been moved and/or changed without authority since that time. Anyone interfering with signage is liable to prosecution. The port remains closed.⁸⁹

For Anthony, designation of prohibited zones around the island were recalled when describing the militarisation of the island:

I only welcome them [the asylum seekers] but the Australia government sent the SAS troops to block them off and they say you can't go there. They turn the whole island into a war zone and disrupted our normal lives ... you can't go to the wharf, you can't go fishing, the whole Cove was roped off by the navy, you can't even go for walking.⁹⁰

In response to prohibited zones, the union distributed a media release, 'Reclaim Our Fishing Right', which urged residents to attend a protest at the boat ramp on 31 August 2001:

Barriers have been erected to prevent access to the boat ramp ... Enough is enough. The political circus that our government has staged here is affecting our rights to go about the daily routine of fishing, including our people who make their living from daily fishing and dive charters. We call on the Christmas Islanders to attend the community rally at the Boat Ramp, Flying Fish Cove.⁹¹

Militarisation of Christmas Island along with the designation of no-go zones and concerns for asylum seekers led to protest action. Islanders showed solidarity with asylum seekers based on shared experiences. However, these

⁸⁹ Bill Taylor, 'Bulletin: Port closure', *Christmas Island Administration*, no. 62/01, Christmas Island, August 2001.

⁹⁰ Interview with Anthony.

⁹¹ Gordon Thomson, 'Reclaim Our Fishing Rights: UCIW Media Release', UCIW Archives, Christmas Island, 30 August 2001.

shared experiences are not the only explanation as to why islanders supported asylum seekers.

Proximity and witnessing the asylum seeker human face

The question arises as to why the government would instigate no-go zones. The Howard Government's response during the Tampa affair was calculated in such a way that it could assure Australians that it was securing and protecting its borders.⁹² Part of this response was to ensure that a story about humanity never emerged during the Tampa affair, which was achieved by closing the port. ABC Journalist Michael Maher, who was on island during the event of Tampa, explains:

The Government has in mind that if pictures of the asylum seekers get out – pictures of women and children – this personalises the whole issue and perhaps public opinion changes as a result of that. So there's certainly been a very tight cordon kept around this operation.⁹³

Burnside argues that the Howard Government prevented the Australian public from seeing the Tampa asylum seekers in order to exploit the issue for 'electoral advantage' in the lead-up to the forthcoming federal election.⁹⁴ The denial of media access to those on board the *Tampa* was a strategy to prevent them from being 'seen as human beings' and who could not 'tell their stories'.⁹⁵ He states: 'Howard's crucial aim was achieved: the refugees were not seen publicly as individual people for whom Australian citizens could have sympathy.'⁹⁶ While the Howard Government created distance between the public and the *Tampa* asylum seekers, islanders sensed that proximity still existed seeing they had encountered the human face of asylum seekers for over a decade. This was noted by Beth, who stated:

We had boats coming here for years and years before Tampa so people weren't necessarily afraid of the people on the boats ... We weren't afraid of *those* people. They were never portrayed to us as anything to be afraid of. It was just another quirky thing about Christmas Island.

⁹² Richard Devetak, 'In fear of refugees: The politics of border protection in Australia', *International Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2004): 101–9.

⁹³ Michael Maher, 'Asylum seekers transferred to troop ship', *PM Program*, 3 September 2001, accessed 8 October 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s357007.htm>.

⁹⁴ Julian Burnside, 'Refugees: The Tampa case', *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 19.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

Not only do you have crabs walking through your house, you have boats turning up.⁹⁷

While no visibility of the Tampa asylum seekers existed in the public domain, islanders felt they already knew those on board as a result of their long-standing experiences of witnessing asylum seekers. This was captured in an article by Andrew Smoulders, the shire president during the Tampa affair:

The media has confirmed the overwhelming support by the Australian public for the Prime Minister's decision in relation to the 'Tampa.' However, I am convinced that if the Australian public could physically observe and physically deal with the arrival of a boatload of persons seeking asylum in Australia as we have on Christmas Island have been doing for some time now, their support for the Prime Minister's decision would be reduced dramatically ... We need to open the Port of Christmas Island to the 'Tampa' and we need to open our hearts to the 438 individuals that she carries.⁹⁸

Ongoing physical proximity to asylum seekers influenced how islanders responded during the Tampa. In Chapter Four, local resident Eric spoke about this interactions with asylum seekers. During the Tampa affair, he said:

Also I look at the situation of the captain of the ship. He is doing the right thing and the government did not allow him to get the asylum seekers to the shore, that's what I am upset about ... But that's just the worst thing that I remember at that time. The government should have released them, let them ashore, give them shelter and food.⁹⁹

While physical proximity dominated how islanders responded to the Tampa asylum seekers, moral proximity also played a role with islanders feeling a sense of responsibility to assist them. Previous experiences of physical and narrative proximity were precursors for their responses during the Tampa affair. In Chapter Four, both Samantha and Shelley spoke about encountering asylum seekers in the sports hall. Building on their earlier experiences of interacting with asylum seekers, they argued that the way in which the Howard Government dealt with the Tampa asylum seekers was morally wrong. Samantha said, 'What an 'un-Australian' thing to do ... It's like there

⁹⁷ Interview with Beth.

⁹⁸ Andrew Smoulders, 'Message from the shire president', *Islander*, 28 August 2001, 3.

⁹⁹ Interview with Eric.

is a boat out there and how ‘un-Australian’ to not let them land.’¹⁰⁰ Shelley also saw the government’s handling of Tampa as morally baseless:

It makes you feel embarrassed. No not embarrassed but ashamed and sick. It makes you go, ‘Australian? This is not an Australian attitude to be so pushy about it that you actually put people’s lives at risk.’ Fair enough if you have got a policy of no entry but you still have to allow people to safely land and whatever the process is.¹⁰¹

When the Tampa affair ended, some islanders wished to acknowledge Captain Rinnan for his brave actions. On 5 September, local businesses collected funds to stage a fireworks show for the *Tampa* before it set sail from Christmas Island. A local business owner reported that islanders wished to pay tribute to the captain and they organised for one Norwegian-speaking local resident to ‘tell him [Captain Rinnan] sorry about everything that’s happened but goodbye, farewell, maybe come back as a visitor’.¹⁰²

While the islanders were unsuccessful in pressuring the government to bring those on board the Tampa ashore, their concerns remain firmly emplaced within the island space. A small street in the Settlement was named Tampa View on 14 May 2003. Tampa View was the first of a several islander-initiated landmarks relating to asylum seekers that punctuate the island’s landscape (see Chapters Six and Ten). This street name was initiated by local resident Ron Lyons and the Christmas Island Chamber of Commerce ‘... in recognition of the MV Tampa which rescued 433 asylum seekers from a sinking vessel and was involved in a stand-off with the Australian Government off the coast of Christmas Island.’¹⁰³ Speaking of when the street sign was erected, Lyons explained, ‘I got the flag for the Wilhelmsen, I got the Norwegian flag, the Australian flag and the Christmas Island flag and I set them all up and we stood at the back [of the street sign] and toasted, and took a photograph and sent it off to Oslo.’¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Samantha, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Shelley.

¹⁰² Catharine Munro, ‘Tampa to depart Christmas Island’, Australian Associated Press, 5 September 2001.

¹⁰³ Shire of Christmas Island, ‘Road Renaming: Submission’, File reference 12.4.35, Shire of Christmas Island, 12 April 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Ron Lyons, Christmas Island, 28 February 2012.

The Tampa affair was followed by the announcement of excision. The lens in which islanders interpreted this policy was once again through their own historical struggles along with bearing witnessing to asylum seekers.

Excision

On 8 September 2001 Howard announced that from 2 pm that day ‘mere arrival’ at Christmas Island or Ashmore Reef ‘will not be sufficient to found an application for status under the Migration Act 1958.’¹⁰⁵ Under the *Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act 2001*, ‘excised offshore place’ and ‘excision time’ were inserted into section 5 of the Act. This provided for Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef and Cartier Islands to be removed from the migration zone from 8 September 2001 and Cocos (Keeling) Islands from 17 September 2011. Additionally, in section 5 of the Migration Act, ‘offshore entry person’ was inserted and defines a person who has entered the excision zone after ‘excision time’ and is an ‘unlawful non-citizen’ because of way of entry. Under section 46(A) of the Migration Act, an ‘unlawful non-citizen’ cannot apply for a visa until the minister allows them to do so by lifting the ‘bar’ within the legislation allowing for an application to be made.¹⁰⁶

The Tampa affair led to a number of laws being passed through parliament on 26 September 2001. These laws centred on border security along with the penalisation of those who arrived by boat in places such as Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Ashmore Reef, which became known as the excision zone. One Act gave Australian authorities power to detain and remove unauthorised arrivals to ‘declared countries’ is the *Border Protection (Validation and Enforcement Powers) Act 2001*. In addition, ‘declared countries’ became legislated through the insertion of section 198(A) into the *Migration Act 1958*. This change provided the framework for the establishment of Australian-funded offshore processing centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

¹⁰⁵ John Howard MP, Transcript of Doorstop Interview, Sydney, 8 September 2001, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Parliament of Australia, ‘Bills Digest No. 69 2001–02 Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Bill 2001’, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2001, accessed 28 September 2011, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2001-02/02bd069.html>.

Christmas Islander responses to excision

Two days after excision was announced, Christmas Island community leaders met to formulate a response to the policy. They attempted to call on UN General Secretary-General Kofi Annan to negotiate between Christmas Island and the Australian Government about Christmas Island's status as an Australian territory.¹⁰⁷ Community members prepared a public statement that condemned excision. Once again, the islanders' long history of marginalisation and struggle against the Australian Government provided a platform when challenging government policy. Shire President Gordon Thomson stated:

This colonial history combined with the racist colonial regime the Australian government continued to sponsor until the 1980s has etched a deep impression in the psyche of many Islanders. There is an underlying sense of mistrust of Australian authorities. Most people try to forget the past and enjoy the Christmas Island life. We are proud to be part of the Australian nation. However at times like this the old mistrust and uncertainty about our status as Australians springs to the surface. Our minds turn on these current events. Anxiety floods the conscious mind. What is this government up to? What will this place become? ... In the early 1980s the Commonwealth disbanded the old racist regime. In the late 1980s the Commonwealth tried to force everyone off the island. What now? One thing is certain Christmas Islanders have learned to fight for human rights and social justice.¹⁰⁸

With Thomson's claim in mind, islander responses to excision are examinable through what Tanji refers to as 'frames.' She argues:

Frames like collective identity highlight how collective actors look at their own objectives and interpret them to establish 'meanings' of collective action by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and consequences of actions within one's present or past environment.¹⁰⁹

Protests relating to asylum seekers were framed around islanders' own historical plight for equality. Excision was interpreted through these collective experiences on government mistreatment. Furthermore, islanders saw it as

¹⁰⁷ Sam Robertson, 'Islanders call for UN Solution', *Broome Advertiser*, 20 September 2001, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Community of Christmas Island, 'Statement from Christmas Island Community Organizations and Elected Councillors', UCIW Archives, 11 September 2001, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle*, 16.

their role to defend human rights and social justice based on these experiences.

Islanders' ongoing battle with the Australian Government was not only referred to by the local community, but also by Australian politicians. During the second reading of the Excision Bill, Senator Warren Snowdon, who was responsible for representing Christmas Island in the Senate, was unequivocal that islanders were inadequately consulted about excision. He claimed that this made them feel anxious about possible consequences for the community:

What we have done here is say to a particular group of Australians, 'You will wear a particular responsibility in relation to these issues. We won't bother talking to you about it. We won't bother sitting down with you and saying that we have a problem we would like you to help us resolve.' What do they hear about it? They hear about it in the media. They hear in press statements from various government ministers that the Cocos (Keeling) Islands will be excised and Christmas Island will be excised. When I communicated with the people of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands after these matters were portrayed in the media and asked them for their reaction, they said, 'What the hell is going on? Why hasn't anyone bothered to come and talk to us? Why is it that we're expected to be treated differently from other Australians?'¹¹⁰

Opposition leader Kim Beazley wrote to the immigration minister to ask why Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands were not informed about excision:

The communities are dismayed that there has been no attempt to properly inform or consult them about the nature, purpose and detail of the proposed. This consultation needs to have regard for the fact that for many of the citizens and permanent residents of these communities English is a second language ... The communities are anxious that their life be preserved and not be put at risk by the legislation that you propose.¹¹¹

The issue of lack of government consultation continued when Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock visited Christmas Island on 23 September 2001. During the visit, Ruddock announced the construction of a temporary detention processing facility (see Chapter Eight for further details). It was at

¹¹⁰ Warren Snowdon, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, House of Representatives, 19 September 2001, 30980.

¹¹¹ Kim Beazley, Letter to Philip Ruddock, UCIW Archives, 18 September 2001.

this meeting that he also discussed excision with the island community. Ruddock told the community that this policy was a 'decision taken to reduce the attractiveness of Australia'.¹¹² Community representatives responded that they were inadequately consulted, with one Chinese councillor, Kee Heng, citing the Chinese proverb: 'Execute somebody before reporting.' A Malay councillor said, 'Consultation is before the fact not after. We have not been consulted. I want to know if this is going to happen again and again.' Ruddock responded that he understood what they were saying 'but no one is consulting with me, they [boat people] don't tell us what is happening'. After Ruddock's visit, some Christmas Island community organisations released a media statement:

Mr Ruddock, we want you to understand that we do not support the legislation to excise Christmas Island from the 'Migration Zone.' Apart from the practical effects to be discovered, the idea and the execution of the decision to make this law is morally bankrupt ... Our experience is that preferences identified by our community in consultations with the Commonwealth are not affecting the decisions of the Commonwealth. Very often decisions are made by the Commonwealth without any consultation.¹¹³

Speaking of excision, Lola commented, '[Excision] made me very uncomfortable because it is not right ... It think it made a lot of people [islanders] change to be Australian citizens ... Nervous that they would be sent away.'¹¹⁴ While I was unable to verify whether islanders did take up Australian citizenship in response to excision, Lola's quote represented the uneasiness islanders felt about the new migration laws, especially in relation to their past experiences with migration and marginalisation.

Conclusion

Islander support for the Tampa asylum seekers are linked to the proximity islanders have had to asylum seekers, which dates back to the early 1990s. Until the Tampa affair, spontaneous hospitality dominated local islander

¹¹² UCIW, File notes regarding meeting with Ministers Ruddock and MacDonald re proposed changes in Migration Bill and processing centre for asylum seekers, UCIW Archives, 23 September 2001.

¹¹³ Community of Christmas Island, 'Statement regarding the meeting between Ministers Ruddock and MacDonald and Community Organizations: Media Release', UCIW Archives, 27 September 2001.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Lola.

responses as they witnessed the human face of those who sought Australia's protection. Islanders' own historical struggles were a platform for voicing their concerns over the government's handling of Tampa and excision. The Tampa affair demonstrated that Christmas Island can be characterised as a community of protest, and that islanders felt a sense of solidarity with asylum seekers that is premised on faith and shared experiences.

The Tampa affair signified a new approach in how asylum seekers would be detained and processed. In the Tampa aftermath, the implementation of harsh new detention policies were witnessed first hand on Christmas Island. While the government alienated asylum seekers and distanced them from the Australian public, proximity and hospitality was reshaped on Christmas Island as locals sought ways to make contact with those detained and advocate for their rights.

CHAPTER SIX

Tampa Aftermath: 2001 to 2002

In the months that followed the Tampa affair, the number of asylum seekers to arrive by boat in Australia decreased. From 27 August 2001 to 31 December 2001, 13 boats arrived. Of these, two arrived directly on Christmas Island carrying a total of 441 asylum seekers.¹ The majority were transferred to Nauru and Manus Island with only 34 remaining on Christmas Island by late January 2002.² In 2002, no asylum seeker boats arrived in Australian waters. Combined with changes in global refugee flows after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pacific Solution (see Chapter Five) achieved the government's goal in deterring asylum seekers from seeking Australia's protection onshore.³

The chapter first explores how after Tampa, the detention of asylum seekers on Christmas Island changed to a highly regulated security regime and consequently caused a change in how islanders related to asylum seekers. Physical proximity was reshaped as detention created a barrier between the two groups while moral proximity was redefined as islanders bore witness to the suffering of asylum seekers.

The chapter then addresses Christmas Islander reactions to asylum seeker deaths at sea that occurred in 2001 and the actions that followed. Actions included the SIEV X memorial on Christmas Island, which acknowledges the 353 asylum seekers who drowned on their way to Christmas Island and local efforts to establish gravesites for two Afghan asylum seekers who drowned off Christmas Island. Using Perera's work on the Australian Government's silencing of the SIEV X victims and Kleist's research into the SIEV X

¹ These figures are taken from DIMIA, Fact Sheet 74A, 'Boat arrival details (on Australian mainland)'. This is available on the SIEV X website at http://sievx.com/articles/psdp/DIMIA74a_boatarivals.pdf.

² Australian Human Rights Commission, 'A Report on Visits to Immigration Detention Facilities by the Human Rights Commission 2001', 2001, accessed 27 January 2014, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/report-visits-immigration-detention-facilities-human-rights-commissioner-2001#9>.

³ Robert Manne, 'Comment: Asylum seekers', *Monthly*, September 2010, accessed 20 October 2014, <http://www.themonthly.com.au/nation-reviewed-robert-manne-comment-asylum-seekers-2706>.

memorial in Canberra, along with articles from the *Islander*, islander responsibility for the asylum seeker dead is looked at.⁴

The detention regime post-Tampa

In the weeks that followed the Tampa affair, detention arrangements transformed from those simply overseen by the local police to highly securitised. This was in line with mainland detention practices, where detention services have been privatised since 1998. In the post-Tampa period, Australasian Correction Services (ACS) was the service provider to manage immigration detention centres on the mainland and Christmas Island. ACS subcontracted service delivery at detention centres to its operational arm, Australasian Correctional Management (ACM).⁵ No purpose-built detention centre existed on the island when ACM arrived, and asylum seekers were still detained at the sports hall. As the sports hall is located on Gaze Road, a main road in the Settlement area of the island, the presence of ACM guards was highly visible to islanders. Beth and Samantha recalled the arrival of ACM:

Beth: Tampa changed everything ... they [Immigration] brought in ACM. We'd never seen them before. They were wearing black pants, white shirts, reflective sunnies, and they were all the way along Gaze Road sitting on chairs.⁶

Samantha: Like how stupid is that [ACM being deployed to the island]? We had had our local police here doing this job for the last two years and now you are going to sit on your plastic chairs with dark glasses on ... the local reaction then were that this is just bizarre.⁷

Shelley spoke of the sudden changes when it came to detaining asylum seekers on the island after the Tampa affair: 'I think the contrast is what is startling. Before they [asylum seekers] just would be taken off the barge to the

⁴ Suvendrini Perera, 'They give evidence: Bodies, borders and the disappeared', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2006): 637–56; Olaf Kleist, 'Remembering for refugees in Australia: Political memories and concepts of democracy in refugee advocacy post-Tampa', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2013): 665–83.

⁵ Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade; Ferguson, A.B. and Nugent, P.E., *A Report on Visits to Immigration Detention Centres* (Canberra, 2000), 1.

⁶ Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁷ Interview with Samantha, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

sports hall where they weren't heavily guarded. They had to stay there, but they weren't heavily guarded.'⁸

When Phosphate Hill IDC opened on the island in 2001, there was limited consultation by the Australian Government with islanders about this centre, with little information being available to the community at the time. This is discussed in Chapter Eight.

In early 2002, Shelley was employed by ACM as an activities officer. As she had worked inside the detention regime, the information she provided as an informant was insightful. Her ACM role involved teaching English to detainees, organising recreational activities and at one point caring for detained children. She first heard about the position through her friend Jim, who was contracted by ACM to oversee English programs for detainees. Shelley's experience in education was not the only reason Jim offered her a position:

He [Jim] asked me because they needed English teachers and he said to me that he was trying to work it so they brought local people in rather than more guards. They [ACM guards] were all prison officers then and they were treating people like they had committed a crime, it was really policing.⁹

Shelley described working at the detention centre:

As an education officer I was required to take a walkie-talkie with me at all times. Seriously, I was in trouble if I moved more than five metres to help someone with something and if I didn't take it with me and the guards observed it, they'd be like, 'You have to have that on you at all times!' and I would be like 'I just went over there to help.' They'd say, 'No it has to be on you at all times.'¹⁰

She described the regulated security environment, particularly in terms of employees and visitors accessing the centre:

Control One, which was a tiny little box where they [ACM] had to sign in and out officers, detainees, visitors, every time they went in or out and they communicated from there via little walkie-talkies. Anyway, you weren't allowed inside ... unless it was prearranged and they [ACM] knew you were coming, so they had a list of who was

⁸ Interview with Shelley, Christmas Island, 25 February 2009.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

expected ... It was so surreal because it really was like living in a military regime.¹¹

Shelley recalled several stories about the treatment of asylum seekers by both the Immigration Department and ACM. For example, she spoke of the lack of information disseminated by the Immigration Department to asylum seekers, 'They [asylum seekers] had no idea what their rights [were], where they were, or what was going to happen to them.'¹² Consequently, asylum seekers turned to her for information:

Every day they [detainees] would say to me, 'Shelley, have you heard anything?' They were desperate, all of them desperate for any news from the outside because they were told nothing. They could beg, they could scream they were told nothing. They were told only that they had to wait for the process that's it. No approximation of how long it would take.¹³

From 2001 to early 2002, the Australian Human Rights Commission visited Australia's detention centres, including Christmas Island. Afterwards, it detailed extensive human rights concerns relating to the detention of asylum seekers, including children. Similar to what Shelley described, the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Sev Ozdowski, observed the distress that the lack of information caused detainees on Christmas Island. He reported:

There was no pay phone in Phosphate Hill facility on Christmas Island at the time of my visit. Newly arrived detainees were unable to make a phone call on arrival, although detainees were given a chance to write a letter or fax. As phones are the main lifeline to the outside world for detainees in remote facilities lack of access causes great concern and stress, and is completely unacceptable ... On Christmas Island the detainees cannot access television, only videos. The only rationale for this restricted access to outside news for those in separation detention must be to prevent detainees knowing of their right to apply for legal assistance or to apply for protection.¹⁴

Lack of information and communication was not the only human rights issue that Ozdowski observed. The mental health of asylum seekers was of concern

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, 'A Report on Visits to Immigration Detention Facilities'.

both on Christmas Island and at all immigration detention centres. He reported:

One of the most important and disturbing issues in all detention facilities is the prevalence of depression and stress among detainees. In all facilities I visited I met with detainees who had experienced or were experiencing mental distress themselves or observed mental distress among others.¹⁵

Ozdowski noted that there was no resident psychologist on Christmas Island. Furthermore, he maintained that the 'existing [mental health] services were inadequate to meet the needs of asylum seekers' at all immigration detention centres, including Christmas Island.¹⁶

Consistent with Ozdowski's observations, Shelley witnessed poor mental health status among those detained at Phosphate Hill IDC. She recalled the case of one man: 'One of the fathers went completely insane, he couldn't function and his wife she had a baby and a six-year-old. She'd just had the baby and she was 20, very young and her husband was losing the plot.'¹⁷

Shelley also told of the tragic story of Fatima Erfani, a 20-year-old Afghan woman who died from a brain aneurism in detention. She recounted how Fatima suffered severe headaches and high blood pressure in detention and was then taken to the island's local hospital. Instead of being hospitalised, she was returned to the detention centre. When her condition deteriorated, she was evacuated to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, where she lapsed into a coma before passing away. Her husband, Ali Reza, was permitted to accompany his wife to Perth. However, the Immigration Department refused Ali Reza and Fatima's three children Zanab, Zahra and Hayder permission to travel with them and Shelley looked after the children at the centre. Shelley maintained that one of the reasons Fatima died was because of being incarcerated in highly stressful environment, which gave her high blood pressure.

Shelley highlighted the impact detention had on the wellbeing of children detained at Phosphate Hill IDC:

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Interview with Shelley.

Just the way the kids were, like when you arrived. Even if they were excited you never saw it because they were just so, so scared to have their normal response. So it was really hard, they had obviously lived with lack for so long ... I'd put out a craft activity for the kids and they just grabbed and stashed it because I guess they thought that if they didn't get it now then that would be their last chance and I think that is from the fear of not knowing what is going to come next.¹⁸

As Shelly witnessed the ongoing suffering of those detained, she sought covert ways to assist them. One approach involved encouraging local residents to help detainees. Under the new security regime, in order for ACM to grant a visit, islanders needed to know detainees' names. Also, asylum seekers were required to provide details of the visitor's name to ACM. These two rules made the interaction between asylum seekers and islanders challenging, particularly when asylum seekers had limited opportunities to meet potential visitors. Meanwhile, islanders had few opportunities to learn asylum seekers' names. Shelley circumvented this restriction by passing notes to people in detention, written by locals wishing to support asylum seekers. These notes were welcome letters, telling detainees that islanders wished to help them and outlined the visits process. She explained:

To get any messages in there [the detention centre] they had to be secretly taken in because you could not send them [detainees] a letter until they were known and they didn't know anyone ... Luckily we had some people who worked there slip some notes through so then the asylum seekers found out that there were people who wanted to help them ... So when I started working there I would write down all the names of people who wanted to help and I would slip it in and say to them [detainees], write these people a letter, or make a request to see this person ... and then they will be able to visit you but until then they can't come ... It was mostly through people who were working there who managed to get away with it [taking in notes] because they weren't searched as thoroughly ... It was like, I don't know how you would describe it, it was like being in like a movie or something having to smuggle things in.¹⁹

While the regulated security regime hindered contact between islanders and asylum seekers, it did not deter islanders from seeking out ways to maintain acts of hospitality. In Chapter Four, it was noted that Derrida's explanation of

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* To the best of my knowledge, the local people who she refers to assisting the asylum seekers by giving letters were herself and one other islander.

‘absolute hospitality’ involves the host giving place to the ‘absolute, unknown, anonymous other’ and not asking for ‘reciprocity’ or ‘even their names’.²⁰ The act of islanders wishing to simply help unknown detainees is an example of absolute hospitality that precipitated from islanders’ long-standing experiences with asylum seekers.

Reflecting on Shelley’s actions gives rise to the question as to why she was motivated to assist the asylum seekers. Gosden’s work on refugee advocacy and social action in Australia from 2001 to 2006 provides some answers. Gosden investigated why some Australians advocated for asylum seekers in detention. She found that there were several factors that motivated people: empathy for those detained; personal shame associated with being Australian and the diminishment of Australian values because of government policy; and a sense of personal responsibility given that the government took no political responsibility for those that sought Australia’s protection and consequently suffered in detention.²¹ These factors are apparent in Shelley’s response to asylum seekers. Empathy and responsibility were clearly evident when Shelley said, ‘You feel like you have to [help], like you are responsible because there aren’t many people here that will do this and you have this feeling that these people deserve a chance.’²² Her response derives from witnessing the suffering of the asylum seekers she encountered. This resembles Naif’s description of bearing witness: ‘enacting the moral responsibility arising from the encounter with the other, and is a form of ethical resistance because when we bear witness, we acknowledge as other and turn towards him or her’.²³ Shelley continued:

For a compassionate person to see that [detainees’ suffering] day after day, you’d do anything to try and relieve that. I got so involved with those people and they were relying on me because they knew that I was willing to break the rules ... I started to get all this pressure from everyone that was in there because they had worked it out that I was

²⁰ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000): 25.

²¹ Gosden, Diane. ‘Collective action in support of asylum seekers: The actions of a minority Australian population in the period 2001–2006’, in *Strangers, Aliens and Foreigners Conference*, Oxford, UK, 2010.

²² Interview with Shelley.

²³ Rahel Naef, ‘Bearing witness: A moral way of engaging in the nurse–person relationship’, *Nursing Philosophy* 7 (2006): 149.

that type of person and I was just getting more and more pressure so I tried to organise other visitors to take the pressure off me a bit ... I got so involved with those people and they were relying on me.²⁴

Attempting to alleviate the suffering of asylum seekers came at a risk. By coordinating with detainees to meet with visitors meant she jeopardised losing her job: 'They [detainees] knew that I was willing to break the rules and I was like, you can't do this because they [ACM] will kick me out so quickly if they see that I am having all of these private conversations.'²⁵ However, she was prepared to take the risk if it ameliorated the detainees' suffering.

Shelley's response is not one in isolation. Some detention centre employees have sought ways to overcome the obstacles of assisting detainees in a highly regulated environment. Zion, Briskman and Loff have investigated the professional and ethical dilemmas that have confronted nurses working in detention centres. This environment is not in line with an 'ethics of care', which is fundamental to the nursing profession.²⁶ Nursing requires an intimate relationship with the patient, which in a highly regulated security environment is regularly compromised. ACM guards constantly monitored and controlled the interactions between nurses and detainees. Furthermore, nurses have reported that the suffering of detainees was further compounded by guards treating detainees with little respect often swearing at them, being rude and calling them by their detainee identification numbers rather than their names.²⁷

For some nurses who bore witness to the suffering of asylum seekers, they attempted to ameliorate it by finding ways to interact with detainees without the guards being present. For example, unsupervised interaction could take place by nurses directly administering medication to detainees in their rooms. It was during these interactions that nurses would acknowledge the difficult situation that detainees faced and offer solace. Some nurses contacted people outside the detention centre, providing them with detainees' details so they could send them care items such as baby clothes and comfortable shoes. Zion,

²⁴ Interview with Shelley.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Deborah Zion, Linda Briskman and Bebe Loff, 'Nursing in asylum seeker detention in Australia: Care, rights and witnessing', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 35 (2009): 546–51.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 548–9.

Briskman and Loff state: 'Treating detainees with kindness and respect and seeking even small ways to ameliorate both their physical and mental suffering was in itself an act of resistance by those nursing in detention.'²⁸

Like the nurses, Shelley sought ways to resist the detention system. Her compassionate response aimed to alleviate the asylum seekers' suffering and treat them like fellow humans. Unlike some islanders who responded and identified with asylum seekers based on their own experiences of marginalisation, Shelley did not fall into this category. Instead her responses emerged from bearing witness to asylum seekers' suffering. Porter explains that a politics of compassion is premised on 'a shared humanity, that is, our universal vulnerability to risk and the urgency to maintain human dignity.'²⁹ Despite the Australian Government failing to take political responsibility or act compassionately towards asylum seekers, detention workers like Shelley and the nurses saw took responsibility for the detainees, and as Zion and her colleagues note, 'Provided some degree of hope and drew asylum seekers back into the human circle.'³⁰ These sentiments of humanity are echoed by Hollands, who notes that many volunteers identified with refugees 'not because they have similar political or religious convictions, nor because they have family ties or the same ethnicity, but because they are human beings just like themselves'.³¹

Shelley was not the only Christmas Islander who took responsibility for asylum seekers. The next section discusses how islanders felt a sense of responsibility for those who drowned at sea.

Deaths at sea

As outlined in Chapter Four, islanders were first exposed to the dangers that faced asylum seekers travelling by boat when a group of Sri Lankans drowned off the coast of Christmas Island. In the post-Tampa affair period, islanders became increasingly aware of the perilous situations that asylum seekers encountered when they crossed the Indian Ocean. In the post-Tampa affair

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Elisabeth Porter, 'Can politics practice compassion', *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 99.

³⁰ Zion, Briskman and Loff, 'Nursing in asylum seeker detention', 550.

³¹ Marlie Hollands, 'Upon closer acquaintance: The impact of direct contact with refugees on Dutch hosts', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (2001): 305.

period, two boat tragedies occurred: the SIEV X on 19 October 2001 and the deaths of two Afghan women on 8 November 2001 who were on board the asylum seeker boat *Sumber Lestari*.

The SIEV X tragedy occurred on 19 October 2001, when 353 people drowned in international waters inside the Australian aerial border protection surveillance zone. Only 45 people survived. The acronym SIEV X is derived from the term Suspected Irregular Entry Vessel, which is used by the Australian Navy to refer to asylum seeker boats approaching Australian waters, with the 'X' used to indicate that this vessel never arrived. Public servant Tony Kevin, who conducted extensive research into this tragedy, assigned the vessel this name. He lobbied for an official inquiry into the sinking of the SIEV X, and in 2002 the Senate Select Committee into a Certain Maritime Incident investigated the tragedy; however, its findings were inconclusive. Kevin points out that during the Senate's examination 'there were grave questions about the apparent absence of any actionable intelligence on SIEV X' available to the 'highly resourced' Australian Defence Force during the hours that the boat was sinking.³² Furthermore, survivor testimonies reveal that an unknown military boat inspected the capsized vessel but did not rescue those floating in the sea.³³ Kevin argues that the SIEV X 'sent a sharp deterrent message' to asylum seekers planning to come to Australia by boat and the lack of unaccountability and transparency relating to this tragedy 'all has the smell of some kind of ruthless and profitable criminal sabotage or disruption operation'.³⁴

While the SIEV X survivors were never taken to Christmas Island, this tragedy was acknowledged on Christmas Island. In 2004, a SIEV X memorial national art exhibition was held at the island's Chinese Literary Association. The exhibition formed part of a nationwide art collaboration project with more than 300 schools participating and included 30 students from the

³² Tony Kevin, *Reluctant Rescuers: An Exploration of the Australian Border Protection System's Safety Record in Detecting and Intercepting Asylum-Seeker Boats, 1998–2011* (Canberra: Tony Kevin, 2012): 19.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, 19–21.

Christmas Island school.³⁵ The project involved students designing a SIEV X memorial to be built in Canberra. Speaking of the Christmas Island students' participation in the art project, the *Islander* reported:

When the project began the students knew nothing of the inadequate fishing boat that became known as the SIEV X or its largely Afghani, Pakistani and Iraqi passengers attempting to seek a better life in Australia by heading towards Christmas Island. The students watched videos about the tragedy, searched websites and discussed their reactions to the SIEV X.³⁶

Local awareness about the tragedy expanded in the lead-up to the third anniversary after the Shire of Christmas Island published two extensive articles about the SIEV X.³⁷ These articles made reference to the Senate Select Committee into a Certain Maritime Incident and highlighted that many questions remained unanswered about Australia's response to the SIEV X.

In 2004, when the SIEV X exhibition came to the island, Olympic gold medallist Betty Cuthbert performed the opening, which coincided with the third anniversary of the event. A remembrance service was held at Tai Jin House with more than 60 people attending. The *Islander* stated:

Representatives from Rural Association for Refugees, the Catholic Church, the Baha'i Association, Christmas Island District High School and Shire of Christmas Island were given the opportunity to express their feelings and lay flowers of remembrance for the asylum seekers who died so tragically. Betty Cuthbert's visit brought the community together and highlighted the caring and compassionate nature of Christmas Island residents.³⁸

In 2005, a permanent SIEV X memorial was unveiled by the shire. The memorial is located near Tai Jin House and is surrounded by 353 rocks, each painted with the names and ages of those who drowned (see Figure 6.1). The inscription on the memorial reads, 'In memory of the 146 children, 142 women and 65 men who drowned on their way to Christmas Island, in search

³⁵ SIEV X National Memorial Project website, 'The Memorial', accessed 27 November 2013, <http://www.sievxmemorial.com/the-memorial.html>.

³⁶ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Remembering SIEV X', *Islander*, 5 November 2004, 12.

³⁷ See, Shire of Christmas Island, 'SIEV X – Questions, answers and more questions', *Islander*, 5 November 2004, 16–17; Shire of Christmas Island, 'Remembering SIEV X', *Islander*, 5 November 2004, 12.

³⁸ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Betty Cuthbert inspires remembrance', *Islander*, 3 December 2004, 1.

of freedom and a better life.’ During my research in 2008, it was evident that the tradition of islanders coming together on the anniversary was well entrenched. A local refugee advocate invited me to participate in the preparation of the remembrance service, where I assisted in painting the names of the deceased on the rocks. At that memorial service, islanders placed flowers on the memorial and read prayers, and a refugee advocate read out the names and ages of those who had passed away.

At the Senate Select Committee into a Certain Maritime Incident hearings, no survivors were invited to provide testimonies. Furthermore, the government refused to release the names of those who drowned at sea. Perera points out: ‘Australia was quick to wash its hands officially of any responsibility for the deaths, the Prime Minister Howard protesting, “We had nothing to do with it, it sank, I repeat, sunk in Indonesian waters, not Australian waters.”’³⁹ Despite the government’s silencing of the SIEV X tragedy, Perera argues that these ‘nameless bodies of the dead’ actually became ‘political bodies’ and function as ‘ongoing bearers of powerful political meaning’ when analysing the Australian Government’s asylum seeker policy.⁴⁰ In 2001 the government declared ‘absolute control’ over its borders with the enactment of a state of emergency, and refugees being the ‘fictionalised enemy’.⁴¹ It was through this state of siege that deaths at sea occurred, and she maintains that this provided the conditions for ‘necropolitics’, a term Mbembe defines as ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’.⁴² Perera argues that Australia’s maritime border has now produced ‘spaces of exception at sea’.⁴³ This includes the militarisation at the Australian border through increased defence surveillance, enacting ‘terror’ on asylum seekers, including women and children, and the use of force to push asylum seeker boats back to Indonesia.⁴⁴

By way of contrast there are Australians, including islanders, who have protested over these deaths at the border. Activists have ensured that the

³⁹ Perera, ‘They give evidence’, 645.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 638.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 645.

⁴² Achille Mbembe in *ibid.*, 643.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 638.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 644.

victims of Australia's siege on asylum seekers are not forgotten. Perera states, 'The terminated bodies of refugees, fallen witness to the sovereign power of death, yet create new border maps for the living.'⁴⁵ Here, activists have protested over the government's treatment of asylum seekers, such as Olympian Betty Cuthbert's journey to Christmas Island and a small number of advocates who sailed from Perth to Christmas Island. Perera argues that these actions at the border are significant because it:

Disrupts the dynamic of invisibility/visibility through which the bodies of the SIEV X operate as at once shameful spectacle and shameful national secret. Refuting the power of blood, actions such as this enact new forms of connection and continuity in space and time as they assert a kinship with the bodies expelled to the limbo of not-Australia. The border advances, expands and claim the gravesites of these bodies as an Australian space, a site to which we owe responsibilities.⁴⁶

Islanders have responded to the government's silencing of SIEV X victims by ensuring that their names are etched in the public domain. Examples include the construction of the SIEV X memorial site, the painting of the names of the deceased on the rocks that surround the memorial and the act of the advocates reading out the deceased names at the memorial service. Given islanders' long-standing proximity to asylum seekers, they displayed a sense of personal responsibility to acknowledge those who died at sea, despite the Australian Government's failure to do the same.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 651.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 653.

where many asylum seekers first set foot in Australian territory. While the plaque on the Christmas Island memorial acknowledges that the SIEV X victims were en route to Christmas Island, the rocks symbolise the place where the victims hoped to reach, and to use Perera's earlier words, 'enact new forms of connection and continuity in space and time' and 'kinship'.

When Kleist interviewed Beth Gibbings, a co-organiser of the SIEV X Canberra memorial project, she said that the memorial was a 'human project'. Kleist argues that the SIEV X memorial invokes cosmopolitan memories of a universal belonging that links humans together through their moral obligation to one another and a 'common humanity'.⁴⁸ The SIEV X memorials on Christmas Island and Canberra are expressions of a shared humanity. Such sentiment resonates in an article Biddulph wrote titled 'Memorial is also hope for humanity'. He explains that the memorial is:

About morality, about absolute standards of right and wrong. It is about the sacredness of human life and about how humanity must transcend politics in times of emergency and need. If we don't stand for ultimate human values, if we lose our moral compass then we are a country doomed to fatal division and decline. Who would even care about us?⁴⁹

The SIEV X tragedy was followed soon after by a second tragedy, and once again islanders took responsibility for the asylum seeker dead.

Asylum seeker gravesites on Christmas Island

Less than a month after the SIEV X tragedy, on 8 November 2001, two Afghan women – Fatima Hussein (who was pregnant) and Nurjan Hussaini – died while travelling to Christmas Island. Their boat caught on fire and navy personnel from the HMAS *Wollongong* instructed the passengers to jump into the water.⁵⁰ While the other 162 passengers survived, Nurjan and Fatima drowned in the ocean despite the navy's effort to save and revive them.⁵¹ Ali

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 679.

⁴⁹ Steve Biddulph, 'Memorial is also hope for humanity', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 August 2007, accessed 20 November 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/memorial-is-also-hope-for-humanity/2007/08/29/1188067190942.html>.

⁵⁰ Michael Gordon, 'Six days on Nauru', *Inside Story*, 14 August 2012, accessed 26 February 2014, <http://inside.org.au/six-days-on-nauru>.

⁵¹ Michael Gordon, 'Freeing Ali', *Australian Policy Online*, 12 September 2005, accessed 26 February 2014, <http://apo.org.au/commentary/freeing-ali>.

Mullaie, an Afghan unaccompanied minor who was on the boat with the two women, told journalist Michael Gordon that he was with Fatima's husband when he learned of his wife's death. Gordon writes, 'They wept together, and Mullaie remembers an Australian sailor retreating to the upper deck where he, too, broke down, consumed by the tragedy, hiding his tears behind his cap.'⁵²

Today, Nurjan and Fatima are buried in the Christmas Island Islamic cemetery. In March 2011, I met Naik Mohammad, the son of Nurjan when he came to Christmas Island to visit his mother's grave. In 2001, after witnessing his mother's death, he was sent to Nauru, where he was detained for several years. Almost a decade later he made the journey to Christmas Island to visit his mother's grave. Naik showed me the place where his mother and Fatima are buried. The two graves are an unlikely combination of Afghan Shia and Malay Sunni traditional burial sites. Headstones are traditionally used by Shias. Malay Sunnis do not use headstones but small wooden pillars called *mesam*, which are placed at each end of the grave. In the case of Nurjan and Fatima's graves, headstones are erected at one end and *mesams* at the other (see Figure 6.2). Speaking of these grave sites, heritage researcher and writer Helene Bartleson says, 'While in some parts of the world, such a combination would be unlikely, on Christmas Island it reflects the tolerance, generosity of spirit and shared grief in the local Islamic community.'⁵³ When the two women were buried, members from the island's Muslim community organised the burial ceremony and made an appeal to the local community to donate money to cover the gravestones' costs.⁵⁴ A local Muslim resident explained to me that as Nurjan and Fatima had no family on the island, the local Muslim community believed that it was their responsibility to ensure that these two women were buried according to Islamic traditions. Bartleson explains that a cultural tradition among the island's Islamic community has evolved, involving the planting of frangipani trees next to some graves to draw evil spirits away. A frangipani tree was planted to ensure Nurjan and Fatima rested in peace after suffering such tragic deaths.⁵⁵ Each year the local

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Bartleson, personal communication with Dimasi, 19 November 2014.

⁵⁴ Bartleson, personal communication with Dimasi, 18 March 2011.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

Muslim community holds a working day at the Islamic cemetery and tends to the graves, including those of Nurjan and Fatima.



Figure 6.2: Nurjan and Fatima's graves

Note the Afghan Shia headstones, Malay Sunni *mesam* and small frangipani tree.
Photo taken by author, March 2011

Conclusion

This chapter looked at how there was a considerable shift in the way asylum seekers were managed on Christmas Island after the Tampa affair. The highly regulated security regime changed the way in which islanders related to asylum seekers. However, some islanders were not deterred by the policy shift, and acts of hospitality continued. This occurred even when islanders never met Nurjan and Fatima or the asylum seekers from the SIEV X, and a sense of moral responsibility prevailed. Asylum seeker gravesites and the SIEV X memorial have meant that islanders remain conscious of asylum seekers within the island space.

While the aftermath of the Tampa affair marked a period where asylum seeker boats no longer arrived on Christmas Island, this was only temporary. In 2003, islanders witnessed the arrival of Vietnamese asylum seekers, who were later followed by West Papuans and West Timorese. How islanders responded to these three groups is the focus of Chapter Eight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Asylum Seeker Arrivals: 2003 to 2007

From 2003 to 2007, the way islanders encountered asylum seekers evolved. Bearing witness to the asylum seeker ‘face’ moved beyond the confines of the highly regulated detention regime and now occurred in public community spaces. In July 2003, 53 Vietnamese were intercepted off the coast of Western Australia near Port Hedland before being transferred to Christmas Island on 5 July 2003. The group was known to islanders as the Hao Kiet, named after the boat they travelled on. For two years, the Hao Kiet were detained at the Phosphate Hill IDC. In 2005, seven West Timorese arrived near the Western Australian Aboriginal community of Kalumburu. The group were then transferred to Christmas Island. This arrival included a family of four, detained in the Christmas Island community, where they stayed for several years. In early 2006, a group of West Papuans was transferred to the island after their outrigger canoe was discovered on Cape York Peninsula. For two months they were detained until receiving temporary protection visas (TPVs) and resettled in Melbourne. While the number of asylum seekers to come to Christmas Island from 2003 to 2007 is small, their presence on the island was significant in shaping Christmas Islander responses towards asylum seekers. This chapter will focus on those detained during this period.

In the first section, islander responses to the Vietnamese asylum seekers are explored. Gosden’s research into refugee advocacy and personal relationships between advocates and asylum seekers is drawn on when considering the relationships that developed.¹ Sources such as interviews, articles from the *Islander* and Christmas Island community notices are utilised to make sense of how these relationships developed.

In the second and third sections, islander responses to the West Timorese and West Papuans are examined. I discuss ethnic and kinship ties, community contribution and narrative proximity and look at how these themes are

¹ Diane Gosden, ‘ “What if no one had spoken out against this policy?” The rise of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy in Australia’, *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–21.

important factors when examining how responses to asylum seekers are shaped on Christmas Island.

Vietnamese asylum seekers

By early 2003, no one was held at Phosphate Hill IDC. Most detainees had been transferred to mainland detention centres or offshore to Nauru and Papua New Guinea. However, on 1 July 2003, 53 Vietnamese asylum seekers, known as the Hao Kiet, arrived in Australia. The group were at sea for one month before arriving 3 nautical miles east of Port Hedland (Western Australia).² Despite arriving inside the migration zone, the HMAS *Canberra* transferred them to Christmas Island on 5 July 2003. Upon receiving visas two years later, the group was transferred to the mainland in July 2005. Given the Vietnamese lengthy stay on Christmas Island, most islanders became aware of or were in contact with the Vietnamese. Islanders encountered them on excursions and attending public events. Vietnamese children were met by parents, children and school teachers at the local school. Furthermore, some islanders advocated for the plight of these asylum seekers and regularly visited them at Phosphate Hill IDC.

When the Vietnamese asylum seekers first came to Christmas Island, their arrival was announced on the front page of the *Islander*. The article outlines their boat journey to Australia. It also notes that one of the passengers, Van Hoa Nguyen, was an Australian citizen of Vietnamese descent who was taken to Perth after being arrested for facilitating the boat journey. Passengers on board the *Hao Kiet* were believed to be part of Nyguen's extended family. The article explains that Thuy Phung Tran, Nguyen's wife, who resided in Melbourne at the time of her husband's arrest, said that the family had suffered persecution and torture with some family members killed by the Viet Cong communists.³ This public information influenced how islanders responded. Jacobsen argues a host community's social receptiveness of refugees is determined by their understanding or perception of why people are

² Kaye Bernard, 'Submission Inquiry into the Administration and Operation of the Migration Act 1958', Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee, August 2005, 3.

³ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Arrival of asylum seekers', *Islander*, 18 July 2003, 1.

fleeing, 'community sympathy will be higher than if the sending causes are unknown and misunderstood'.⁴

Bill Taylor, the island administrator, published news about the Vietnamese arrivals in a community bulletin. The local community was thanked: 'Thanks go to the island residents who watched yesterday's transfer and who gave the Vietnamese men, women and children such a warm island welcome.'⁵ Christmas Island community support was also evident when Trung Doan, then federal president of the Vietnamese community in Australia, visited Christmas Island in September 2003. He published an article about his visit in the *Islander*:

One thing I learned when visiting the Vietnamese asylum seekers held at the Christmas Island IRPC in early September, was that humanity is alive and well on Christmas Island. I met about a dozen islanders, mostly through chance meetings. Everyone was either willing to help these people, or keen to learn why they fled.⁶

Stories relating to the Vietnamese asylum seekers were often published in the local newspaper. On one occasion there was an article about an upcoming 'Asylum Seekers and Immigration Law Talk', which locals were invited to attend.⁷ In another, the Christmas Island Catholic Church published 'A Prayer For Refugees': 'Look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry, bless those who work to bring them relief, inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts.'⁸ In both 2003 and 2005, articles in the *Islander* revealed that the Christmas Island community was invited to raise concerns with the Immigration Detention Advisory Group (IDAG), an independent body that provides advice to the immigration minister on detention issues, when the group visited the island.⁹

⁴ Karen Jacobsen 'Factors influencing the policy responses of host governments to mass refugee influxes, *International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 670.

⁵ Bill Taylor, 'Non-citizen transfer', *Indian Ocean Territories Administration Community Bulletin*, no. 62/03, 6 July 2003.

⁶ Trung Doan, 'Privacy at the IRPC', *Islander*, 26 September 2003, back page.

⁷ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Asylum seekers and immigration law talk', *Islander*, 27 August 2004, 21.

⁸ Christmas Island Catholic Church, 'A Prayer for Refugees', *Islander*, 22 April 2005, 31.

⁹ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Public notice: Visit by Immigration Detention Advisory Group (IDAG) officials', *Islander*, 26 September 2003, 4; Shire of Christmas Island, 'Immigration Detention Advisory Group turns spotlight on Christmas Island', *Islander*, 12 March 2005, 6.

Kaye Bernard, a refugee advocate from the mainland, made regular trips to Christmas Island to visit the Vietnamese. She was actively involved in campaigning for the rights of the Vietnamese detainees, and regularly published articles in the *Islander* about their struggles. In one article, she wrote of the trauma that the detention centre caused the children. She explained that a leading Western Australian doctor, Professor David Fletcher, visited and treated the detainees, where he 'likened the trauma presented in the detainees as the worse he has seen in his 30-year medical career' and was 'stunned at the guarding of detainee children under his medical care while in hospital by two large GSL guards'.¹⁰ Photos of young Vietnamese children locked behind high security fencing were included in the article.¹¹ On another occasion Bernard wrote about the story of Amy, a Vietnamese baby who was born in detention. This child was granted a protection visa but remained in detention with her parents while they awaited decisions on their visa applications. Bernard wrote:

Amy is currently 'stuck' in detention on Christmas Island with her young parents. Amy's parents arrived seeking asylum in Australia aboard the *Hao Kiet* on 1 July 2003 and have been held in detention since then on Christmas Island ... Amy has just celebrated her first birthday in detention despite holding refugee status. The Immigration Minister has an application for the parents 'sitting on her desk' that needs to be actioned by her ASAP. It is totally unacceptable for Amy as the REFUGEE and holder of an Australian temp protection visa under the Migration Act 1958, to be 'stuck' in detention ... Call on the Minister to intervene and grant Amy's parents protection visas.¹²

In the article, the minister's contact details were provided so islanders could write letters to the minister and urge that baby Amy and her family be released. A picture of Olympian gold medallist Betty Cuthbert holding Amy during her visit in 2004 accompanied the article. In another story published on the front page of the *Islander*, Bernard told of a pregnant Vietnamese woman Thi Hoai Thu, who was moved off island to a 'secret location somewhere in Perth'. The article noted that Thu was being kept

¹⁰ Kaye Bernard, 'Letter to the editor: Cornelia Rau on Christmas Island', *Islander*, 12 March 2005, 25. GSL refers to Global Solutions Limited, which was the detention service provider at this time.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Kaye Bernard, 'Letter to the editor', *Islander*, 24 March 2005, 19.

‘underground’ in Perth after the media published a story about her incarceration. Bernard writes: ‘DIMIA¹³ will not unveil the whereabouts, even to close family members nor will they allow any visitors to the family of the hidden address ... This is no way to treat a lady especially one who is pregnant.’¹⁴

Articles published in the *Islander* provided the local community with updates about the Vietnamese and subsequently generated local support for their plight. All articles included the names of the Vietnamese and photographs. This had the impact of reiterating the presence of the Vietnamese who, as will soon be shown became part of the Christmas Island community.

Over time, personal relationships between islanders and the Vietnamese evolved. Support, compassion and hospitality often characterised these relations. As relationships intensified and deepened, some islanders became active in finding ways to assist. This included providing items such as clothes and shoes, or financial assistance for legal applications. In the Letters to the Editor section of the *Islander*, Kim Ho, a Christmas Island resident, urged the community to help raise money for the Vietnamese legal appeal in the Federal Magistrate’s Court after 44 asylum seekers had their temporary protection visa applications rejected. Ho said:

This anticipated cost of the appeal will be \$20,000. Please help us in our fundraising efforts to help them [asylum seekers] raise this amount. Cheques can be made out to the Vietnamese Community ... We also intend placing collection boxes in several locations around the Island. Your assistance in organising any other fundraising activities such as sausage sizzles, cake stalls, car washing, garden clean-ups etc. would be more than greatly appreciated.¹⁵

On one occasion, a wine and cheese night with performances by local musicians was organised. Members of the Christmas Island community came together to raise money so that items could be purchased for the Vietnamese families. An article in the *Islander*, ‘Refugee fundraiser a success’ explains:

All the food and wine was donated so the entry fee and donations went directly to help the Vietnamese families of those held in the IRPC near

¹³ Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

¹⁴ Kaye Bernard, ‘Mums the word in detention’, *Islander*, 22 April 2005, 1.

¹⁵ Kim Ho, ‘Letter to the editor’, *Islander*, 7 May 2004, 6.

the sports ground. A total of \$951 was raised on the night with further donations coming from individuals and organisations ... Another successful event demonstrating Islander generosity and care towards the Vietnamese refugee group.¹⁶

In order to find the genesis of such support, the following section draws on interviews with participants who came into contact with the Vietnamese at the local school.

Personal relations with the Vietnamese asylum seekers

Understanding how relationships formed between islanders and the Vietnamese during this period and the importance of these relationships is fundamental when considering islander responses to asylum seekers. Within the refugee advocacy movement personal relationships between advocates and asylum seekers 'have become a central aspect of the milieu of the movement and the social action emanating from that', and it is through this 'closely woven fabric of relationships' that 'the social action of advocates becomes informed and directed'.¹⁷ In order to understand how these relationships evolved, a significant event on Christmas Island that occurred during this period is discussed: the attendance of asylum seeker children at Christmas Island District High School (CIDHS), the local island school.

In 2003, schooling of asylum seeker children no longer took place at the detention centre, but instead at CIDHS. Allan Thorton, the CIDHS vice-principal explained that when the Vietnamese first arrived the education of children was provided by GSL (which had replaced ACM in 2003), which was 'spectacularly unsuccessful', as they 'didn't have the resources to either employ or manage the people, so they were just getting anyone they could find off the street ... they actually weren't very successful with the facilities they had'.¹⁸ In response, Thorton offered a classroom at CIDHS and teaching resources for GSL. However, there were 'a few issues', which led to the detention centre manager requesting that Thorton manage the teacher – to which Thorton responded that he would not manage a teacher he did not

¹⁶ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Refugee fundraiser a success', *Islander*, 24 March 2005, 15.

¹⁷ Gosden, ' "What if no one had spoken out against this policy?" ', 10.

¹⁸ Interview with Alan Thorton, Christmas Island, 1 December 2009.

employ.¹⁹ As a way of resolving the problem and benefiting the asylum seeker children, he put forward a submission to the Immigration Department proposing that CIDHS deliver education services to asylum seeker minors. A memorandum of understanding was reached between the CIDHS and the Immigration Department in 2003. He explained that the school always had a policy of integrating asylum seeker children with local children, which ‘worked really well’, particularly when the asylum seeker children were in small numbers, such as in the case of the Vietnamese.²⁰

In Chapter Six, it was shown that islanders found covert ways to form relations with those detained. This was no longer necessary when asylum seeker children went to school and it provided a platform for the development of relations between islanders and the Vietnamese. When the Vietnamese children attended the local school, teachers came into contact with asylum seekers. Consequently, covert methods were no longer necessary to find out asylum seekers’ names and make contact. School teachers, such as Ella, spoke enthusiastically about the Vietnamese asylum seekers. She first moved to Christmas Island in 2003, in need of a ‘sea change’ from Darwin.²¹ She pointed out that her mother was accommodated in Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre for two years after migrating to Australia after World War Two:

She would tell me what the war was like, of what it was that people were escaping to come out here. Because of that I feel I have a lot more empathy and understanding [with] what they [asylum seekers] were trying to get away from and start a new life and the risk they took.²²

Boat people were not entirely new for Ella, as she had lived in Darwin during the mass exodus of Vietnamese boat people escaping the Vietnam War. She briefly recalled seeing Vietnamese boats arriving, although she never had direct contact with those on board. Ella’s first interaction with asylum seekers was through teaching the Vietnamese asylum seeker children at the school. She said:

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

One day we had a sports carnival and it was their [asylum seeker children] first actual outing so they came down to the sports hall. I wasn't teaching them at that time, there was another teacher with me. My involvement came later with them when she went off sick and they [the school principal] said to me, 'Can you come in and teach the Vietnamese kids.'

Ella described bearing witness to the poor mental health of the Vietnamese children as a result of the government's asylum seeker policy:

They had been in detention, behind razor wire as that was the government policy then, for quite some time and I could see their mental health deteriorating daily, especially the boys. The girls were a little more resilient, sort of taking it on the chin. The boys, especially one boy he knew he was losing his childhood, he knew he should be hanging out with girls and spending time with his mates, but he would some days come in very angry, or very, very depressed and on those days, no pressure, we just left him alone and then he'd usually come join us. He said, 'I am missing my childhood.'²³

In a similar way that Ella's mother had shared the story of escaping the war to come to Australia the asylum seeker children shared their experiences of fleeing with her when they attended school. For example, she said, 'They were a long time travelling, they were about three weeks on that boat and sick, they said they were so sea sick.'²⁴ While the asylum seekers were held in detention, she visited them.

Beth worked as a teacher at the local school when the Vietnamese children attended. She recalled that children were subjected to the detention security regime even when they were educated in the community:

The kids were coming to school and on the way out they had to have their bags searched and then put back in the centre ... At the school, the guards used to come in at lunchtime and would sit there and watch them [asylum seeker children] eat their lunches.²⁵

As relations between Beth and the asylum seeker children developed, she began regularly visiting the Vietnamese at the centre. She said:

The Vietnamese were the hardest, the hardest group of people to come through here. Two years is a long time to be spending in detention and

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009

it was harsh detention ... You would sit there and you'd watch the people you were visiting weren't leaving the centre they could only move from one compound to another with barbed wire fences ... their lives consisted of just shuffling from one place to another for two years. There were four- to five-year-old children that did two years of that! It was nasty ... There were no mirrors in the centres for them and the first thing that the parents would do when they visited their children at school was run into the toilets and look in the mirror because they hadn't seen their reflections. It was just evil ... Two years of evil and we just watched people become so despondent and just broken hearted.²⁶

From personal relationships to advocacy

Gosden argues that the refugee support movement was characterised by the personal relationships that formed between asylum seekers and their advocates. This resulted in 'a deeper level of personal involvement and responsibility' on the advocates' behalf, and 'relationships of trust and friendship often developed'.²⁷ For these supporters, 'the issue became not only an abstract one concerning principals of justice to unknown "others". Rather, these "others" became known as human beings, and often friends and loved ones.'²⁸ According to Gosden, these relationships developed for two reasons. Firstly, the lengthy period asylum seekers were detained, which led to extensive communication and involvement. Secondly, as many asylum seekers were very vulnerable in the detention centres, supporters felt a sense of 'personal responsibility' and 'shame' associated with government policy, which 'created a social and emotional environment which facilitated the development of those relationships'.²⁹ In other words, relationships went beyond simply witnessing the face of the other and responding to the formation of personal relationships and led to 'familial terms' being commonly used when supporters referred to those asylum seekers they assisted.³⁰

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Diane Gosden, 'Collective action in support of asylum seekers: The actions of a minority Australian population in the period 2001–2006', in *Strangers, Aliens and Foreigners Conference*, Oxford, UK, 2010.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

Personal relationships that formed between supporters and asylum seekers that Gosden describes are evident in Ella and Beth's responses to the Vietnamese. Ella pointed out that she remains in contact with a Vietnamese family four years after they left Christmas Island. Beth's relationship with the Vietnamese can be described as deep and personal:

I was very, very close to a family with two older girls ... Their mother was in a coma back in Vietnam so they had come over with their father and left their mother. So they were worried about their mum and the mum was living with the aunty and I remember the aunty saying to them once, 'Why haven't you sent me any money to look after mum?' They were worried she'd be put out on the street. Dad looked after them and he felt really guilty that his family were in detention. He felt that they were imprisoned and he thought it was all his fault. They were the last to leave [detention]. They spent two years and the older daughter developed an eating disorder and had to be medivaced out because she got too thin. Then they were all released and I think it was six months later and dad died of cancer. It was just nasty. The whole thing for that family was just nastiness. They still keep in touch, they still ring me.³¹

Ava, an employee at the local school who had regular contact with Vietnamese children, began the interview by telling me, 'Everyone [the local community] comes together whenever there is some kind of tragedy on the island. It doesn't matter if that person was Chinese or Malay, the whole community will come together and help each other.'³² This attitude also extended to asylum seekers. She recalled how the Vietnamese asylum seekers became involved with the Christmas Island community:

The Vietnamese, they contributed the whole time they were here ... they showed us how to grow fabulous vegetables, this is our [Vietnamese] type of cross-stitch, this is our cooking and people took on these types of things, people will say things like 'This style [cross-stitch] was shown to me by a young girl from the detention centre.'³³

The long-term detention of the Vietnamese led to them becoming quite involved with the local community. As time went by, this led to the Vietnamese integrating into the local community. Ava pointed this out:

³¹ Interview with Beth.

³² Interview with Ava, Christmas Island, 4 February 2009.

³³ *ibid.*

You know their [asylum seekers] names, they might have children who go to school with your own children and play, that perception of 'these are all refugees' fades. We all know why they are here but when you see them in the community more and more they become 'such and such', and the idea of refugee doesn't really cross your mind anymore, they become just like everybody else.³⁴

There are two reasons behind these positive responses, which centre on islanders being in close proximity to the Vietnamese. Firstly, there were opportunities for personal relationships to initially develop as some islanders had contact with asylum seekers through the local school. Teachers gained insight into the challenges facing the Vietnamese both their homeland and in detention. Some teachers then began visiting the asylum seekers at the centre and subsequently personal relations deepened and intensified. Secondly was the lengthy stay on the island. Over two years, there were opportunities for Vietnamese to be involved with the local community. Islanders came into contact with asylum seekers at community events and at the school. The local community was regularly kept up to date with the plight of the Vietnamese, with regular articles being published in the newspaper.

While some islanders formed relations with the Vietnamese, not all did. However, during both interviews and informal conversations with locals, nothing negative was ever said about the Vietnamese. One underlying reason for this can be perhaps be found in a comment Ella made when talking about the community being receptive of the Vietnamese:

The community was quite open and welcoming to the Vietnamese. I have a feeling that was because they were in the camp and there was no community detention, there was nothing like that. They came out for school then they went back, they came out to go to the Buddhist temple then they went back, and if they came out to go to the beach they always went back. They were seen on the weekends or going to and from school, so there was no hostility, not that I picked up anyway. The community seemed quite happy; people would go up and visit them.³⁵

Ella's comment implies that the community responded positively towards the Vietnamese asylum seekers because they were controlled by the detention

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Interview with Ella.

centre's security regime. The context in which Ella was interviewed is important. The Rudd Labor Government had moved approximately 25 mainly Afghan asylum seekers into community detention on the island. Islander responses to this group were different compared to the Vietnamese, which I explore in Chapter Nine. Ella hinted that local responses related to whether asylum seekers were held in detention. While detention resulted in a boundary between islanders and asylum seekers and created a boundary between the two groups, community detention led to the sharing of local spaces, which islanders had no control over.

As personal relationships developed, some islanders' support for asylum seekers intensified. During visits at the detention centre, locals witnessed the suffering of the Vietnamese. Beth reflected on this by explaining why she and other islanders turned to advocacy and activism:

I think the Vietnamese, for a lot of people, they [the Vietnamese] were here for two years and we watched them disintegrate, just their mental state and their hope and everything. They were the people that were here the longest and I think a lot of people got angry and felt helpless, so that's when we started getting more active and proactive and finding ways to raise the issue and also to try and help them ... I always had an interest in asylum seekers from the early days of waking up and having boats out here. But I think it was when the Vietnamese came in for me that's when I started getting really active because I started getting really angry and upset and really, really angry and powerless. Just angry and doing everything that I possibly could to try and help those people and probably to my own detriment. I was getting really angry and writing emails to John Howard every day ... They [the Vietnamese] just broke my heart, they still do.³⁶

Activism on Christmas Island

In 2003, several local women established Christmas Island Rural Australians for Refugees (CIRAR). CIRAR was a sub-branch of Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR), a national non-governmental organisation formed in October 2001 in response to Tampa affair. On RAR's website it defined itself as 'an informal group of concerned citizens working hard to turn this country

³⁶ Interview with Beth.

away from an inhumane and bizarre policy'.³⁷ It had over 90 groups around Australia, which included the Christmas Island branch. CIRAR had around 20 members. Gosden notes that what characterised most of these refugee groups was a 'sudden shared sense of the urgency of the situation, and of the need for the taking of individual responsibility in opposing and bringing change to this policy'.³⁸ Beth said that she became involved with the CIRAR after witnessing the impact detention was having on the Vietnamese children.³⁹ This led to her seeking out ways to ameliorate their suffering.

Organised by CIRAR, locals held a public protest on International Refugee Day, June 2005. At Phosphate Hill IDC, islanders hung balloons and paper hearts with the Hao Kiets' names printed on them along the centre's fence. Simultaneously, the Vietnamese stood at the fence with banners that asked for freedom. The islanders' own protest banner, 'Have a heart. Free the Hao Kiet' and the paper hearts were indicative of how islander responses centred humanity and solidarity. Gosden argues that supporters within the refugee advocacy movement are 'opposed to the assault on human rights that occurred with the Australian Government onshore refugee policy' and took 'social action aimed at ameliorating the effects of the policy'.⁴⁰ Burgmann, who writes on social movements, elaborates:

When people make what they perceive to be eminently reasonable demands upon relevant authorities and find these authorities either resistant or incapable of offering redress, direct action is a common resort, and the formation of a social movement a logical outcome.⁴¹

For those advocates on Christmas Island, they were of the view that it was unreasonable that the Vietnamese should suffer in detention and consequently asked the government for their release. For example, Beth explained that she wrote to John Howard almost daily asking for the release of the Vietnamese. However, these emails did not result in any change and the Vietnamese

³⁷ RAR Website, 'Welcome to the RAR website', accessed 14 March 2011, <http://www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org.au>.

³⁸ Gosden, ' "What if no one had spoken out against this policy?" ', 10.

³⁹ Interview with Beth.

⁴⁰ Gosden, ' "What if no one had spoken out against this policy?" ', 8.

⁴¹ Verity Burgmann, *Power, Profit and Protest: Australian Social Movements and Globalisation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 7.

continued to suffer in detention. The next step was for her to take subversive action:

We were very subversive. We were getting photographs from inside the detention centre out into the media of the Vietnamese. There are classic photos on the internet somewhere ... We were doing a lot of subversive stuff at that time but we found that we sort of needed to.⁴²

Beth noted that in a small community such as Christmas Island being subversive was not difficult when it came to assisting those in detention:

Christmas Island has a lot of problems with detention in that it's out of mind out of sight, but if you want to be subversive it's the easiest place to be subversive because people have to drive buses, people have to clean, people work up at the airport. You will always find out what you need to find out.⁴³

Beth recalled that at the time of the Vietnamese being released: '[Immigration] wouldn't tell us when we rang up and we said that we would like to go up to the airport and say goodbye, "We can't tell you what time they leaving; it's classified,"'⁴⁴ However, she pointed out, 'Being Christmas Island it wasn't hard to find out,' so she and some other islanders who had formed personal relationships with the Vietnamese took the matter into their own hands to ensure that they said farewell.⁴⁵ She said:

They [Immigration] wouldn't tell us what time the plane was landing so we could go up and say goodbye. So we waited until we saw all the detainees on the buses ... The bus rushed through the airport, through the gates. They [the Vietnamese] didn't get out to walk to the plane. They went through and locked the gates while we were waving at the bus to stop. They went around where the plane was parked, in a different spot. It was behind the building so we couldn't view it or get a shot of it. The bus drove up to the plane and they all got on ... We were absolutely devastated. We got in that car and moved to where you can watch the planes take off next to the landing strip and the pilot of the plane as he was taxiing, he must have seen or heard what was going on with us not being able to say goodbye. He stopped the plane at our car so we could all wave.⁴⁶

⁴² Interview with Beth.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

Not long after the Vietnamese left in July 2005, the West Timorese asylum seekers arrived. Local community responses to the West Timorese are examined in the following section.

The West Timorese

On 5 November 2005, seven West Timorese were discovered after wading ashore near the Western Australian Aboriginal community of Kalumburu. A family of four and three single men were detained in Darwin and then transferred to Christmas Island on 17 November 2005. On 22 November 2005, the family was released into island community detention while the three men remained at Phosphate Hill IDC. The three West Timorese men and the family were all repatriated to Indonesia in 2007. When I arrived on island in August 2008, the family were back again. The family, known as the Ridwans, had made the journey back to the island. This time around, Mahmud, the father, skippered the boat with his wife and two children on board. In 2009, protection visas were granted and they resettled in Brisbane. Locals rarely referred to them as the 'West Timorese', but as the 'Ridwan family' or 'Mahmud, Farida, Bryan and Taufiq'.

Given the length of time the family resided in the Christmas Island community, the family formed relationships with islanders and, as with the Vietnamese, locals consequently learned why they had fled Indonesia. Bryan and Taufiq attended the local school, making friends with the Christmas Island children. Language and religion also allowed the Ridwans to integrate into the local island community. The Ridwans spoke Indonesian, which is very similar to Malay. The Ridwans also followed Sunni Islam like the majority of Muslim islanders, which resulted in the formation of relationships. For example, one interviewee, Rahul, explained that as Mahmud had no transport, every Friday he would pick Mahmud up from his home to attend the mosque together.

As with the Vietnamese asylum seekers, with time, opportunities became available for the Ridwans to become involved in the local community. They were active in the Christmas Island community through their volunteer work. This was noted by Ava:

We have an Indonesian family here at the moment who is constantly volunteering for the op-shop. Constantly volunteering for things at the school, constantly volunteering if help is needed with arts and crafts, anything community based. They are the first ones to put their hand up.⁴⁷

I personally witnessed the Ridwans regularly volunteering in the community, such as Farida serving customers in the local thrift store. In 2008, Mahmud assisted in collecting the rocks for the SIEV X memorial. During the Christmas Island 50 Years of Australian Sovereignty celebrations in 2009, Mahmud made bird sculptures, which were used in the celebration parade and today hang on the wall of the recreation centre.

While some interviewees spoke about witnessing the suffering of the Vietnamese in the Phosphate Hill IDC and the heartbreak this caused the local community, the Ridwans were never spoken of in a similar manner. Rather, they were seen as being a fairly self-sufficient family that lived among the community, with the local community responding to them positively. Jacobsen's work on host communities highlights several reasons why positive attitudes towards the Ridwans seemed to be a common community response. She notes that a community's 'perception of its ability to absorb refugees' plays a part, as does a community's 'willingness', which is influenced by 'beliefs' about refugees.⁴⁸ As the Ridwans were only four people, they would have been perceived locally as having minimal impact on the community and easily absorbed. When refugees are 'self-settled' in the community, they can 'impose strains on medical, educational and municipal facilities, on housing capacity'.⁴⁹ As the Ridwans were only a small family, they did not strain local resources. She also notes that a local community is 'less likely to be threatened when refugees bring resources such as agricultural skills, labor and capital'.⁵⁰ While the Ridwans did not bring resources, their volunteering was looked upon favourably by most islanders. Finally, Jacobsen explains, 'ethnic affinity appears to be a strong predictor of acceptance', especially as many

⁴⁷ Interview with Ava.

⁴⁸ Karen Jacobsen 'Factors influencing the policy responses', 666.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 667.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

border communities 'share ethnic and kinship ties'.⁵¹ As noted earlier, the Ridwans could easily communicate with islanders. A number of islanders had migrated from Malaysia and Indonesia, and therefore the Ridwans shared similar ethnic ties. Furthermore, a shared religion resulted in them being accepted by Sunni Muslim islanders.

While the Ridwans were well integrated into the local community and self-sufficient, when they needed local support or advocacy, islanders assisted. This was particularly evident when they received a negative decision on their application for a temporary protection visa in February 2007. Following on from this, an email was circulated around the island community, noting that the family could not apply for another visa unless they provided new information about current unrest in their hometown, which they were unable to do at that point in time. An email written by a member of CI RAR to Shire President Gordon Thomson stated:

This family, despite their high profile as asylum seekers in our small community, have integrated into life here with us. They have given to this community, through volunteer work and made trusting and loving friendships with islanders. They have become part of our Christmas Island community.⁵²

The likelihood of deportation renewed islander action. A petition was initiated requesting that the immigration minister grant visas to the Ridwans. The petition stated:

We, the undersigned members of the Christmas Island community, request that the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, the Honourable Kevin Andrews MP, grant the West Timorese family who have been on our island for the past 15 months (Mahmud, Farida, Bryan and Taufiq Ridwan), Temporary Protection Visas so as to allow them refuge in Australia and avoid further persecution if they were returned to Indonesia.⁵³

Despite the community's attempt to assist the Ridwans to stay in Australia the family was returned to Indonesia (before returning again in 2007). While islander responses to the West Timorese were supportive, the following case

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 669.

⁵² Email sent by CI RAR member to Gordon Thomson, UCIW Archives, 15 February 2007.

⁵³ Christmas Island Community, 'Petition to the Immigration Minister', UCIW Archives, 16 February 2007.

study involving the West Papuan asylum seekers provides insight into what happens on Christmas Island when islanders are not accepting of asylum seekers.

The West Papuans

While the Ridwans were in community detention 43 West Papuans entered the Australian migration zone near Cape York on 18 January 2006 in an outrigger canoe named *Project Exodus*. They were holding a banner stating: 'Save West Papua people souls from genocide, intimidation and terrorist from military government of Indonesia'. The day after their arrival, a Hercules plane transferred them to Christmas Island. The men were held in Phosphate Hill IDC and the families at a community detention house in Drumsite. According to Senator Andrew Bartlett, islanders were told by GSL that interaction with the West Papuans was prohibited. At the same time, the Immigration Department informed the Ridwans not to contact the West Papuans.⁵⁴

According to Beth, there was much more mainland public interest about the West Papuans compared to previous asylum seekers post-Tampa affair. At this time, Beth and Shelley were coordinating CIRAR, and received an overwhelming response from mainlanders wishing to support the West Papuans' plight. For example, Beth said, 'The West Papuans were like movie stars! And you had to see this. Shelley and I were getting cheques, money orders for thousands of dollars a week for their cause from the mainland.'⁵⁵ Shelley also said, 'Once you have made that link to the mainland you've got all those organisations ringing you asking what they can do to help ... having to have that responsibility of being the person to call can be really overwhelming.'⁵⁶ When I spoke with Margaret Robinson, the CEO of the Christmas Island Shire, she also noted the public interest and support:

⁵⁴ Andrew Bartlett, West Papua Updates, Bartlett's Blog, accessed 10 March 2010, <http://andrewbartlett.com/?p=103>, 21 January 2006.

⁵⁵ Interview with Beth.

⁵⁶ Interview with Shelley, Christmas Island, 25 February 2009.

The West Papuans, because of the political situation on the mainland, they got them sorted quick smart. They were here for a very short period of time because of the Australian community, because they had been hearing stuff in the news about what was happening in West Papua and people were being killed. Everyone was really saying, 'They are really legitimate refugees', so they were [went] through this place [quickly]. Where there is a political will, there is a way and others like the poor old Vietnamese ... or the West Timorese who languished here for a year and a half and were sent home.⁵⁷

After two months on Christmas Island, the West Papuans were granted TPVs and resettled in Melbourne. Given their short stay on the island, they had limited opportunities to interact with the local community. Unlike during the Vietnamese period, where the local newspaper regularly featured stories about the Vietnamese asylum seekers, the *Islander* featured few articles about the West Papuans.

The West Papuan asylum seekers caused some consternation during their short stay. When they were granted visas, the plane was delayed and the Immigration Department could not return the male West Papuans into detention; the men were accommodated in the community. Enjoying their freedom, the West Papuans became drunk and wandered around the local community, curiously peering into people's windows. David Marr made reference to the incident after he visited the island in 2009:

They were all very black. They had little support. Some of the families held in the town had never lived in European houses. They were curious and wandered about looking in windows. The night before they were due to fly to Perth, some of the men hit the piss. Then the clouds came down for days and their plane couldn't get away. It was an ugly time that's still not forgotten.⁵⁸

Ella also recalled this incident:

I was approached by some of the Chinese community who were very, very distraught about an incident that happened with the West Papuans ... Because they had got their TPVs they could not be put back in the detention centre so they were put up in Christmas Island

⁵⁷ Michelle Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion', Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 2007.

⁵⁸ David Marr, 'The Indian Ocean Solution: Christmas Island', *Monthly*, September 2009, accessed 14 March 2014, <http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2009/september/1340345612/david-marr/indian-ocean-solution>.

Lodge, right in the middle of Poon Saan community ... They walked around in large groups and the Chinese found this intimidating. Apparently one looked in a window and frightened somebody. There was this rumour that they had stolen a car, but that was actually a local boy who had stolen the car ... So it was a series of unfortunate events, which also caused a lot of angst and mistrust, which has probably flowed on and has contributed to what is happening now.⁵⁹

Speaking of the same incident, Beth said:

They [West Papuans] didn't do a lot for community confidence ... The way that whole thing was managed [by the Immigration Department] ... I think this had a lot to do with the changing of community perceptions [of asylum seekers] into [for] the worst.⁶⁰

As noted by Jacobsen, a host community is more likely to be socially receptive of refugees if they have some understanding of why asylum seekers have come. To the best of my knowledge, no local information was disseminated about why the West Papuans were on the island. Opportunities for narrative proximity did not exist for islanders to listen first hand to the West Papuans' plight. Unlike the case of the Ridwans, where there was renewed advocacy action, islanders did not see the need to do the same with the West Papuans given the amount of public interest and support for their case. Furthermore, the Immigration Department did not inform islanders that the West Papuans were being released in to the community and were of no threat, which may have minimised community fears.

One resident informed me that after the incident occurred and the West Papuans became aware that they had upset the local community, one West Papuan, Herman Wanggai felt the need to write a thank you and apology letter in the *Islander* on behalf of his fellow asylum seekers. He wrote:

Today, the 2nd April 2006 at 5.20 in the evening we will be leaving for Melbourne. It has been known by all our friends on Christmas Island that from the moment we arrived until now when we are preparing to leave, we, the 43 asylum seekers, would like to convey that you are the first most important people in our lives. You are the first people to help us. We are happy, happy because the people of Christmas Island are kind and friendly. Because of this we would like to ask for forgiveness if during the course of our stay we did things that were not so good,

⁵⁹ Interview with Ella, 16 February 2009.

⁶⁰ Interview with Beth, 4 March 2009.

which have offended the people of Christmas Island. This is what we would like to convey because, to us, all of you have helped a great deal while we were on Christmas Island. Finally, till we meet again. Free West Papua.⁶¹

Conclusion

Drawing on three different case studies, this chapter provided insight into how proximity was reshaped from 2003 to 2007, which consequently produced a variation in islander responses. Beginning with the Vietnamese cohort, it was shown that personal relations formed between islanders and asylum seekers that were premised on close encounters such as at those at the school and through witnessing the asylum seekers suffering in detention. While the West Timorese were not perceived as suffering to the same extent as the Vietnamese, the community were welcoming of their presence particularly given that some islanders shared a common language and religion. Furthermore, the West Timorese created no strain on local resources.

Islander responses to the West Papuans signified how islanders responded when they had no control. This group were basically unknown to the community. Very few islanders had witnessed their suffering in the detention centre or heard the stories that come from narrative proximity. As Rozakou stated in Chapter Four, hospitality sets the agenda in how the stranger is to comply with the rules of the host. In the case of the West Papuans, islanders perceived these rules as being broken when these asylum seekers caused unrest in the community upon their release from detention. At this time, that detention no longer served as a boundary between the asylum seeker stranger and the island community host.

It was during the stay of these three groups on Christmas Island that plans were being developed by the Australian Government that would significantly change the way asylum seekers would interact with islanders and the Australian public. Chapter Eight looks at the construction of North West Point detention centre and how proximity was once again redefined between islanders and asylum seekers.

⁶¹ Herman Wanggai, 'Letter from the 43 asylum seekers', *Islander*, 7 April 2006.

CHAPTER EIGHT

North West Point Immigration Detention Centre: 2002 to 2008

On 12 March 2002, the Minister for Department of Territories and Regional Services (DOTARS) came to Christmas Island. As islanders gathered at a community meeting, Minister Wilson Tuckey informed them that construction of a 1,200-person Immigration Reception Processing Centre (IRPC), otherwise known as North West Point (NWP) was soon to commence. Three days later in the *Islander*, a media release by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock stated that the proposed centre ‘will provide a disincentive for people to put their lives at risk by boarding unseaworthy boats to come to Australia’ and ‘will send a clear message that Australia is standing firm on mandatory detention’.¹ McMaster argues, ‘Detention as policy and in practice is a political act of deterrence.’² Deterrence was the cornerstone of the Howard Government’s policy. The announcement of NWP sealed the island’s fate. For the next decade, government policies on asylum seekers, detention and border protection dictated the lives of islanders.

During the evenings of my first few weeks of fieldwork in 2008, I often gazed across the Indian Ocean in the direction towards NWP. From my deck in the Settlement when cloud cover was minimal, a luminous glow was visible. Most islanders witnessed the glow from their homes or while drinking at The Bosun, a local tavern. Though the centre had no detainees then, NWP’s lights were turned on for security reasons.

While in earlier periods islanders were in close vicinity of asylum seekers, the emplacement of NWP marked a significant reshaping of proximity. A maximum-security detention centre ultimately created distance between islanders and asylum seekers, with local boundaries being redefined. Consequently, islander encounters with asylum seekers held at NWP were minimal after the facility opened in 2008.

¹ Philip Ruddock, ‘Permanent Immigration Facility for Christmas Island’, ‘Media Release, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs’, republished in *Islander*, 15 March 2002, 10.

² Don McMaster, *Asylum Seekers: Australia’s Response to Refugees* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 67.

This chapter deals with the construction of NWP from 2001 to 2007 and the opening of NWP in 2008. In the first section, how NWP evolved from its inception in parliament to its construction is discussed, and islander responses to the construction of NWP are explored. Highlighted is the resentment that islanders had towards imposition by government and the lack of consultation. This section draws on primary and secondary data, including interviews with island residents, parliamentary reports and debates, ministerial media releases and articles in the *Islander*. The second section focuses on the opening of NWP in 2008 and asylum seeker policy under the Rudd Government in light of it inheriting this detention facility. The third section addresses islander responses to NWP. This section is derived solely from interviews with locals, as published information about NWP opening in the *Islander* were minimal and media commentary about islander responses is almost non-existent. As will be discussed in Chapter Nine, islanders during this period were more concerned about ‘visible’ asylum seekers who lived among them in community detention rather than those that were ‘invisible’ at NWP. Finally, discourses around the future of Christmas Island and the economic opportunities that NWP presents to the local community are discussed, as is Friese’s ‘border economy’.³

The construction of North West Point: 2001 to 2007

Prior to NWP’s construction, the Howard Government intended to develop a small dual-purpose detention centre. When the centre was not accommodating detainees, islanders would be able to use it as a recreational facility. While this facility never eventuated as planned, as the government built NWP instead, the following account of the proposal reveals the lack of government consultation with islanders.

Public outcry on Christmas Island was evident after Immigration Minister Ruddock and Minister for DOTARS Ian MacDonald announced the temporary facility to the local community. Christmas Island community representatives released a media statement in response to the government’s plans:

³ Heidrun Friese, ‘Border Economies: Lampedusa and the nascent migration industry’, *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 66–84.

The decision to locate a refuge [*sic*] facility adjacent to the rubbish dump has been made in secrecy. It is an appalling decision. No human should be housed at that place. That place is infested by cockroaches, rats, flies, mosquitoes and centipedes.⁴

In parliament, Senator Mackay, the Shadow Minister for DOTARS represented the islanders' concerns:

It appears, according to what I have been told, that the chosen site for the supposedly temporary holding facility for processing asylum seekers that the government announced on the weekend could have been better located ... There was no consultation to identify an appropriate space, and the site chosen is seen by the Islanders as too close to the town centre. The Commonwealth has a lot of vacant Crown land on Christmas Island, and I am sure that it could find something more acceptable from a health basis.⁵

Christmas Island community representatives submitted a report to Immigration Minister Ruddock, recommending an alternative detention site. The site was on Commonwealth land, close to the airport and was not in the way of red crab migration routes. The proposal outlined details for a facility, which they argued would be better equipped to accommodate asylum seekers. It would be more appropriately situated, as it would not be located next to a rubbish tip and would have adequate recreation facilities. Most significantly, the alternative location would have less negative impact on the local community.⁶

The announcement of NWP

While the dual-purpose facility did not eventuate, islanders' concerns escalated with the subsequent government plan to construct NWP.⁷ Despite no boat arrivals in 2002, on 11 March 2002 the Howard Government announced the construction of NWP. When then immigration minister was quizzed why the centre was to go ahead in light of no recent boat arrivals, he

⁴ Community of Christmas Island, 'Statement Regarding the Meeting between Ministers Ruddock and MacDonald and Community Organizations: Media Release', 27 September 2001.

⁵ Sue Mackay, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, Senate, 24 September 2001, 27717.

⁶ Shire of Christmas Island, 'New Facilities for Christmas Island', Proposal submitted to Minister Philip Ruddock on behalf of Christmas Island community groups, Christmas Island, UCIW Archives, 28 September 2001.

⁷ To the best of my knowledge, there is no information on the public record stating why the dual-purpose facility never went ahead.

responded, 'Because we are of the view that we need to have a purpose-built detention facility for future contingencies and it needs to be in a situation where the offshore arrangements that we've put in place are able to operate.'⁸ In light of the government's plans to go ahead with NWP despite no arrivals, Chambers argues, 'The Commonwealth was now in possession of definite plan for a facility that ... could shift shape as the contingencies of reception and processing necessitated.'⁹ This was to have the effect of government to convincing the Australian public that it was in control of its borders and hence the importance of immigration detention.

As the temporary holding facility at Phosphate Hill was deemed inadequate, the government aimed to construct NWP as soon as possible, particularly before the onset of the wet season.¹⁰ Under section 18a of the *Public Works Committee Act (1969)* any public works over \$6 million must be referred to a public works committee before the project can commence. Exceptions can be made if a project is determined to be of 'urgent nature' by the House of Representatives.¹¹ In March 2001, the House of Representatives resolved that NWP was a matter of urgent nature due to the high number of boat arrivals.¹² The majority of NWP's funding came from the Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA), while both the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and the DOTARS contributed financial resources.¹³

The day after the Howard Government publicly announced NWP, Tuckey told islanders that NWP would be completed within a six-month time frame. According to Tuckey, 'We first consulted with a public meeting of probably about 150 people who, with the exception of two people ... gave the centre

⁸ Philip Ruddock, cited in 'Christmas Island detention centre won't end Pacific Solution', *ABC Radio*, 12 March 2002.

⁹ Peter Chambers, 'Society has been defended: Following the shifting shape of state through Australia's Christmas Island', *International Political Sociology*, 5 (2011): 29.

¹⁰ Committee on Public Works, *Update report :The Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre Project* (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2008): 1.

¹¹ Public Works Committee Act 1969, section 18A.

¹² Committee on Public Works, 'The Christmas Island Detention Centre Project', 2.

¹³ For information about funding breakdowns from each of the departments over the different construction phases see Committee on Public Works, 'The Christmas Island Detention Centre'.

very enthusiastic support.’¹⁴ In Tuckey’s media release he stated, ‘I see this as a tremendous opportunity to create jobs opportunities for local people and significantly boost the local economy and improve local infrastructure.’¹⁵ He said that as NWP was the first of its kind built in Australia, it ‘represents a major opportunity for Christmas Island’. He maintained that the government’s decision to build NWP ‘heralds an era of increased local employment opportunities and major economic development for one of our most remote regions’.¹⁶

In the days that followed Tuckey’s announcement, the *Islander* published media releases by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and Senator Warren Snowdon.¹⁷ Ruddock’s media release made clear that the construction of NWP was in line with its policy of deterrence and in the name of border security: ‘The building of a permanent facility on Christmas Island, would send a strong message to people thinking of coming illegally to Australia that they would not set foot on the mainland.’¹⁸ Ruddock also spoke of the benefits NWP would bring for the island community:

There are a range of services required to support the operation of the new facility and the provision of these will benefit the Christmas Island community in many way. The employment and investment generated by the new project will also provide an economic boost to the island.¹⁹

The construction of NWP was perceived by islanders as having economic benefits for the island. At the public meeting held by Tuckey islanders were told about the employment and economic benefits NWP was to bring. Speaking about the economic prospects, Gordon Thomson recalled:

Myself, and the social worker and one other person, were the only ones who indicated opposition to their plan ... For the business people, whose pre-occupation is survival in a business community ... they

¹⁴ Wilson Tuckey, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, House of Representatives, 14 March 2002, 1357.

¹⁵ Wilson Tuckey, ‘New Detention Facility for Christmas Island: Media Release’, 12 March 2002, republished in *Islander*, 15 March 2002, 8.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Warren Snowdon was the island’s member of parliament at that time.

¹⁸ Ruddock, ‘Permanent Immigration Facility’ 10.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

wanted the investment, the 200 million dollar project was a great stimulus for the economy.²⁰

Only days after the announcement of NWP, a Christmas Island retailer who welcomed the new detention centre told the *Australian*, 'We have had a hard few years since the casino closed.' She also added: 'The new centre would likely mean more business and money to go around on the island.'²¹ A few days after Tuckey's visit to the island, a shire news column published in the *Islander* noted:

The general response in our community to the announcement seems to have regard for the significant economic benefits; jobs, \$8 million community sports and recreation facilities ... At this stage the Detention Centre is un-costed, but the planned Darwin facility had a budget of \$40 million. All this amounts to a huge capital inflow to the Island.²²

The cost of detention on Christmas Island

The construction of NWP was not straightforward. By June 2003, no more boats were arriving in Australia and plans for NWP were scaled back to an 800-person facility. Consequently, NWP was referred to a public works committee specifically established to investigate the facility's construction. The committee concluded that the project need not be fast tracked and would be completed in three years. The changes to a smaller facility with longer construction time frame signified that NWP was a contingency centre in case boats arrived in the future. The proposed cost was \$276.2 million and the Walter Construction Group (WCG) was awarded the tender.²³ Given that the centre was no longer being built on a fast-tracked basis, the detention project was re-tendered and awarded to Boulderstone Hornibrook Construction in 2003. In the initial phase, WCG established a 350-person 'man-camp', as islanders referred to it, to house workers involved in the construction of NWP. Situated on Vagabond Road, the camp later named Construction Camp, when it was used to detain families, minors and women.

²⁰ Michelle Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion', Honours thesis, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 2007.

²¹ Megan Saunders and Natalie O'Brien, '1200 beds for the next boat wave', *Australian*, 13 March 2002, 2.

²² Shire of Christmas Island, 'Shire news: Permanent refugee detention centre for Christmas Island', *Islander*, 15 March 2002, 7.

²³ Committee on Public Works, 'The Christmas Island Detention Centre Project', 2.

By 2006, NWP was still not complete. According to one media report, the costs had blown out by 100 per cent. The anticipated opening of the centre by this stage was set for the first quarter of 2007 and was to be operational by the third quarter of 2007.²⁴

On 10 January 2008, the Department of Finance wrote to the Public Works Committee requesting its concurrence that NWP's cost increase by \$120 million, bringing the total construction to \$396 million.²⁵ By that year, the IRPC Public Works Committee was concerned about the lack of transparency and mismanagement of money spent on the project. The Finance Department briefed the committee as to why the project's cost had significantly increased. The main reasons given were 'the delay in the project design documentation by the main works contractor; and the breakdown of the port crane on Christmas Island which was out of operation for six months'.²⁶ The Finance Department told the committee that the project budget blew out because, 'At the time the budget was brought to this Committee in its first form, the project had not been fully defined. It had not been fully scoped.'²⁷

While the construction of NWP was expensive, it was also costly to the island's environment. Christmas Island is well known for its exotic wildlife, such as the red crabs and bird species. The island is home to endangered bird species, which attract bird watchers from around the world. Construction of NWP took place near the breeding grounds of one of the world's most endangered birds, the Abbott's booby.²⁸ Despite outcries from ornithologists, who requested that an environmental impact study be conducted as usually required under federal law, construction went ahead. The Minister for Environment and Heritage David Kemp exempted an impact study on the basis that NWP was in Australia's 'national interest'.²⁹ As Chambers notes, NWP was built in the middle of Christmas Island's 'ecologically unique and

²⁴ Michael Madigan, 'Refugee housing bill close to \$1 million', *Courier Mail*, 13 September 2006.

²⁵ Committee on Public Works, 'The Christmas Island Detention Centre Project', 2–3.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Scott-Murphy, 'Proof Transcript of Evidence', 26 June 2008, 7, cited in Committee on Public Works, 'The Christmas Island Detention Centre Project', 5.

²⁸ Fred Pearce, 'Australia's asylum plans clash with bird on the brink', *New Scientist Online*, 29 June 2002, accessed 28 October 2011, <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn2460-australias-asylum-plans--clash-with-bird-on-the-brink.html>.

²⁹ *ibid.*

fragile rainforests – exceptions from the usual standards of environmental scrutiny were granted in the name of “national security”.³⁰ Islanders learned that the construction of NWP was exempt from the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, after the island administrator Bill Taylor published a public notice in the *Islander*.³¹

Another concern was the erection of gates on the road near NWP. An article by the shire titled, ‘New Immigration Centre may lock the community out’ disseminated information that was provided by DIMIA at a community meeting. At the meeting, islanders learned that DIMIA would erect a gate potentially preventing access to a number of tourist attractions. DIMIA told community representatives at the meeting that it was ‘standard practice for roads around detention centres to have gates around them’. The shire wrote:

Community representatives at the meeting were particularly concerned that DIMIA failed to raise the issue with the community, and appeared to be totally uninterested in any adverse impact the gates could have on community or tourist access to the area. The Department representatives were unmoved by community concern, even though they acknowledged that no particular attempt had been made to make the community aware of their plans.³²

Lack of consultation

The lack of clarity and consultation with the local community by the government over NWP was by far the greatest concern for islanders. This was particularly exemplified by members of the local shire council. According to Shire President Gordon Thomson, NWP was ‘absolutely rolled over the top of us at the Christmas Island (CI) Club, the whites only place’.³³ Former Christmas Island Shire CEO Margaret Robinson noted that the lack of government consultation was particularly obvious when she asked the government for updates about NWP. Speaking of her experiences with DIAC

³⁰ Peter Chambers, ‘Shipwreck with spectator: snapshots of border security in Australia’, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 26, no. 1 (2014): 105.

³¹ Bill Taylor, ‘Exemptions under sections 158 and 303A of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999’, *Territory of Christmas Island Government Gazette*, no. 3/02, 18 April 2002.

³² Shire of Christmas Island, ‘New immigration centre may lock the community out’, *Islander*, 9 December 2005, 8.

³³ Dimasi, ‘Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion’. The CI Club was once a place for only European residents.

and DOFA representatives who had come to the island monthly during NWP's construction she said:

Every time I asked them what about putting something in the *Islander*, 'can you give me some real figures' because they were telling me last time 'we have been employing all these people' and I was like 'perhaps you like to give some figures and publish them in the *Islander* and let people know that', 'oh no, we can't really do that' ... We asked them repeatedly about their plans for existing buildings like the detention centre and the Construction Camp. They want to hold on to everything for contingency. Some of the land that they are using is meant to be land for community purposes and they just took it. When they built Threadbo³⁴ they did not get permission off anyone. With NWP they just said, 'Commonwealth's own laws about environmental protection don't apply.' Basically they said, 'We've got the money.'³⁵

Kelvin Lee, a shire councillor during NWP's construction, also noted the lack of consultation:

They did not consult with Christmas Islanders. When it was first budgeted it was budgeted at only \$200–300 million but after building it, it blew out to over \$400 million. The government committed this big sum of money.³⁶

Anthony, a Chinese resident and a former shire councillor said, They [the government] don't care if we happy or unhappy ... They never consulted us. Always they say I am not going to tell you.³⁷

Eric, a Malay community leader remarked:

The thing is that we have not been notified, or actually consulted, about the new detention centre and what they want to do. What they are going to have over there, why are they doing this and why have we not been consulted? The government just bring people here and get it built and then just leave us here in the dark. We don't know what's happening, so it's always rumours and we always imagine that this is going be like Guantanamo Bay.³⁸

Senator Snowden criticised how the government had provided limited information about NWP to the local community, 'Apart from knowing where the facility will be built the community of Christmas Island know very little

³⁴ Threadbo is a block of flats built in Silver City to accommodate detention industry workers.

³⁵ Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion'.

³⁶ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 16 October 2009.

³⁷ Interview with Anthony, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

³⁸ Interview with Eric, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

about the proposed centre and what it will mean to the community in terms of jobs, training and the type of centre that will be built.’³⁹ He emphasised his concerns in a media release:

It appears that the Minister’s visit has been short on detail and the Islanders remain in the dark about what their involvement will be in the centre ... The establishment of the detention centre has the potential to alter the community economy, culture and lifestyle. Given the limited amount of information provided to the community you wonder why Minister Tuckey flew to the Island. This is yet another example of the Government not understanding the concept of community consultation on Christmas Island.⁴⁰

By 2006, the Christmas Island community was unsure whether the government intended using NWP as a detention facility. Media reports at the time confirm that members of the local community predicted that NWP might actually become a military base.⁴¹ These concerns were exacerbated when riot gear was unpacked from an Australian Defence Force shipping container at the local wharf.⁴² With the lack of consultation came suspicion among islanders about NWP’s future use. This was heightened when a group of US government officials visited the island in early November 2006. The community were told in a DOTARS bulletin: ‘The group is here to assess what services may be offered by Christmas Island businesses and government agencies in case of any US aircraft or ship requiring logistical support.’ Rumours were rife.⁴³ For example, Anthony said:

They [US Army] came here while they were still building [NWP] so we suspect there must be some under the table Howard deal, or maybe they got certain commission. When the air force coming, the major, the colonel met with the administrator and also courtesy visit to shire but they don’t say what they talk about.⁴⁴

Lola also spoke about the US officials’ visit and linked it to the lack of government consultation:

³⁹ Warren Snowdon, ‘Minister Flies to Christmas Island to Deliver Press Release: Media Release’, 12 March 2002, republished in *Islander*, 15 March 2002, 11.

⁴⁰ Snowdon, ‘Minister Flies to Christmas Island.’

⁴¹ Alana Buckley-Carr and Amanda Banks, ‘Island told nothing about refugee plans’, *Australian*, 19 April 2006, 4.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ DOTARS, ‘Community Bulletin: Visit of US Government Officials 4 to 9 November 2006’, Bulletin 011/2006, Christmas Island, 3 November 2006.

⁴⁴ Interview with Anthony.

When they started building they wouldn't tell us what was going on! There were a lot of rumours saying that they were going to use it as a military base. A lot of things going around, you know, like maybe it's the USA government that is going to use it as a military base.⁴⁵

Rumours were intensified by stories about NWP's high-tech features such as underground cabling and CCTV. This was captured by Ramli: 'It was thought in the community to be a military camp, because of the amount of technological stuff being built and other stuff being put into that place and how much they were spending on it.'⁴⁶

Speculation over the government's intended use of NWP increased after the Howard Government's decision to transfer 83 Sri Lankans from Christmas Island to Nauru in March 2007. Some islanders were puzzled if this was indicative for all future boat arrivals. In September 2007, Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews told SBS that asylum seekers would be detained offshore, while NWP would be used for preliminary health and identity checks before asylum seekers were transferred to Nauru.⁴⁷

The government's lack of consultation with islanders was not confined to NWP. As the dual-purpose facility never went ahead, the \$8 million of funds set aside were redirected into building a community recreation centre. Some islanders saw the centre as a pay-off for burdening the island with a maximum-security detention centre. Gordon Thomson recalled: 'Ruddock said, "You are going to keep that and it will be a community facility." Then began the circus of discussion and consultation about this new facility.'⁴⁸ Islanders were inadequately consulted over the plans for the recreation centre while their suggestions to locate it within walking distance of the local school were ignored. Instead, the recreation centre was built opposite the Phosphate Hill IDC, where access is difficult unless one has a car. Speaking of the recreation centre, Owen said:

We don't want an 8 million dollar recreation centre, we want a state of the art ... mammography machine or state of the art gear for our

⁴⁵ Interview with Lola, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁴⁶ Interview with Ramli, Christmas Island, 26 October 2008.

⁴⁷ Rachael Bongiorno, 'Radio documentary on Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre', *SBS Radio Alchemy*, 22 September 2007.

⁴⁸ Dimasi, 'Christmas Island: A Space of Exclusion'.

locals, medical stuff ... One of the ideas here was instead of having a recreation centre, we get our own plane ... it would be maintained by Christmas Island some sort of consortium ... the plane would be of more benefit to people.⁴⁹

Speaking of the recreation centre, Elijah said:

They [DIAC] said, 'We want to build this [NWP] at the other end of the island, there'll be no impact. What can we [DIAC] give you as Christmas Islanders?' A \$12 million recreation centre, which is massive compared with any other small town of the same infrastructure. We appreciate having it, but it was always going to be a non-sustainable thing as far as the financial, they will always have to subsidise it, because it costs a million dollars a year just to have it open without anything else, and there's no way they're going to get that without subsidies. So, that was the buy-off.⁵⁰

NWP and the Rudd Government

In November 2007, the Rudd Labor Government replaced the Howard Liberal Government, and remained in power until 2010. Three key features characterised the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy. The first was its commitment to the mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. On 29 July 2008, the immigration minister announced the Immigration Detention Values during his speech entitled, 'New Directions in Detention: Restoring Integrity to Australia's Immigration System' at the Australian National University. Here, he stated seven detention values:

1. Mandatory detention is an essential component of strong border control.
2. To support the integrity of Australia's immigration program, three groups will be subject to mandatory detention:
 - a. all unauthorised arrivals, for management of health, identity and security risks to the community
 - b. unlawful non-citizens who present unacceptable risks to the community and
 - c. unlawful non-citizens who have repeatedly refused to comply with their visa conditions.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Interview with Elijah, Christmas Island, 28 November 2009.

3. Children, including juvenile foreign fishers and, where possible, their families, will not be detained in an immigration detention centre (IDC).
4. Detention that is indefinite or otherwise arbitrary is not acceptable and the length and conditions of detention, including the appropriateness of both the accommodation and the services provided, would be subject to regular review.
5. Detention in immigration detention centres is only to be used as a last resort and for the shortest practicable time.
6. People in detention will be treated fairly and reasonably within the law.
7. Conditions of detention will ensure the inherent dignity of the human person.⁵¹

The second defining feature of the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy was the dismantling of the Pacific Solution. No longer would the extra-territorial processing of asylum seekers take place offshore. In 2001, legislative changes were made to the Migration Act by the insertion of section 198A. This meant that under Australian law, asylum seekers who arrived in excised places such as Christmas Island became 'offshore entry persons' who were then transferred to a 'declared country', such as Nauru and Papua New Guinea (See Chapter Five). While this legislation remained unchanged under the Rudd Government, by early 2008 Immigration Minister Chris Evans had acted upon the Rudd Government's election promise of ending the Pacific Solution.

The third aspect of the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy was excision and the processing of asylum seeker claims on Christmas Island. Under the Rudd Government, places such as Christmas Island remained excised from the migration zone. However, unlike under the Howard Government where asylum seekers were processed offshore, arrivals under the Rudd Government were processed on Christmas Island. Under section 46(A) of the Migration Act, those that arrive in the excision zone are not eligible to make a protection

⁵¹ Chris Evans, 'New directions in detention: restoring integrity to Australia's immigration system', speech delivered to Centre for International and Public Law, Australian National University, 29 July 2008.

visa application unless the immigration minister permits them to do so which is known as lifting 'the bar' as set out in section 195A of the Migration Act.

In his New Directions in Detention speech, the minister stated that 'excision and offshore processing at Christmas Island will signal that the Australian Government maintains a very strong anti people-smuggling stance' and that 'unauthorised arrivals' would be processed on Christmas Island.⁵² Evans' speech emphasised the Rudd Government's commitment to border security. Speaking of NWP and Australia's policy of border protection, Grewcock notes:

The maintenance of such an expensive, large-scale, purpose built immigration detention facility indicates an ongoing commitment to detention. Even when it was empty during 2008, the Christmas Island centre operated as a public symbol of the government's policing armoury that could be immediately commissioned in the event of another cycle of unwanted illicit migration.⁵³

While the Howard Government employed detention as a deterrent, the Rudd Government shifted away from such a policy. For example, Evans stated: 'Desperate people are not deterred by the threat of harsh detention – they are often fleeing much worse circumstances. The Howard Government's punitive policies did much damage to those individuals detained.'⁵⁴ For the Rudd Government, asylum seekers were to be detained and processed in a timely manner. Reflecting on this significant government policy change, particularly after visiting Christmas Island, led journalist David Marr to state:

Under John Howard, boat people were held in detention for years as a harsh warning to those who might follow in their wake. Labor has dramatically sped things up ... Much of the tough Howard architecture would remain: excision, military interception and mandatory detention. But now detention would be brief: only as long as it took to carry out health, identity and security checks.⁵⁵

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Michael Grewcock, *Border Crimes: Australia's War on Illicit Migrants* (Sydney: Sydney Institute of Criminology Press, 2009), 201.

⁵⁴ Evans, 'New Directions in Detention'.

⁵⁵ David Marr, 'The Indian Ocean Solution: Christmas Island', *Monthly*, September 2009, accessed 30 September 2012, <http://www.themonthly.com.au/monthly-essays-david-marr-indian-ocean-solution-christmas-island-1940>.

At the local island level, given that NWP was operational by 2008 but no detainees were on the island, the Christmas Island Shire requested the facility be used for its own purposes. Shire President Gordon Thomson told ABC's *AM Program* that the community approached the immigration minister to transform NWP into a science research centre.⁵⁶ Kelvin Lee explained: 'We lobbied the government to turn it into some kind of scientific or education centre. But I don't think that at the moment they will see that as a very good suggestion.'⁵⁷

Ramli was puzzled about whether the centre would ever be used because of the problems it might create from a human rights perspective, since government policy had changed under the Rudd Government:

I can't really say whether it is going to be put to use or not, because it was the previous government that decided to build it. There's also the human rights stuff going on about it, because they [human rights and refugee advocates] are all calling it a prison rather than a detention facility.⁵⁸

Opening of North West Point

In 2008, when the centre was operational but accommodated no detainees, the Immigration Department provided me with a tour of NWP. Islanders were also provided with opportunities to visit the facility, with the Immigration Department showing a willingness to allow community members to visit the centre.

During the drive to NWP, the sense of isolation is further compounded. When it is red crab migration time, the 20-kilometre distance can take up to 40 or 50 minutes. As most roads to NWP are unsealed and particularly dangerous during the wet season, driving is slow to avoid potholes and crabs. Nothing is visible apart from thick jungle on both sides of the road. After driving through the jungle, the detention centre appears out of nowhere. Stark steel structures dominate: roofs, fences and caging. Electric and microwave sensor fences, surveillance cameras, an x-ray machine and metal detector. To

⁵⁶ David Weber, 'No detainees in Christmas Island detention centre', *AM Program*, 24 May 2008, accessed 12 September 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2008/s2254558.htm>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 16 October 2009.

⁵⁸ Interview with Ramli.

enter the front door requires pressing an intercom button, which activates a camera in the control room. Once the control room guard views the entrant on the CCTV screen, he or she unlocks the door. Everyone who enters – both staff and visitors – must have their belongings x-rayed upon arrival and exiting the centre. Entrants are required to walk through a revolving door with an inbuilt metal detector. If the detector senses metal, a recorded voice booms through the reception area: ‘Access denied, accessed denied’, and the door locks.

During my tour of NWP in September 2008, the centre already showed signs of decay. Calcium and rust build-up in the pipes was present, as pointed out by detention staff. Built in harsh terrain where torrential rain and sea salt make upkeep difficult and expensive, according to Senate Estimates in 2008, NWP costs \$27 million per year to run without detainees. Even when no detainees are present, NWP requires 24 staff to carry out maintenance services.⁵⁹ Unless more than 100 people were in detention at Phosphate Hill IDC, NWP would not open. Immigration Minister Evans mentioned this earlier in 2008 during Senate Estimates:

It [NWP] is an asset that is available for use at short notice, but currently it does not have any clients in it. It is not my intention to use it for a very small number of clients, because the economics of that do not make sense.⁶⁰

NWP was a purpose-built detention centre. For example, in attempts to stop detainees from hanging themselves shower fixtures are positioned on sharp angles so nothing can be tied to them. Hooks on the backs of doors flick down when excessive pressure is placed on them. To contain potential riots, the centre has a lock-down separation system with electronic compound gates.

Between September 2008 and late December 2008, seven boats carrying a total of 161 asylum seekers had arrived. In response to these arrivals, NWP opened on 21 December 2008. Seventy-four asylum seekers and eight crew were sent from Phosphate Hill IDC to NWP upon its opening.⁶¹ I was on the

⁵⁹ Immigration and Detention Portfolio, ‘Detention (48), Questions Taken on Notice’, Senate, 28 May 2008.

⁶⁰ Chris Evans, *Parliamentary Debates Australia*, Senate, 28 May 20011.

⁶¹ Nicolas Perpitch, ‘Boat people won’t miss festive cheer’, *Australian*, 24 December 2012, 5.

island at the time of the opening and witnessed no publicity about NWP's opening, and to the best of my knowledge there were no media releases published by the government. Prior to the government accommodating detainees at NWP, many islanders had opportunities to tour the centre. This allowed islanders to form their own opinions about NWP, and consequently their responses to asylum seekers became apparent.

Reshaping proximity: shifting of local boundaries

While islanders had mixed responses to NWP, notions of proximity and distance were an underlying discourse in all of their responses. Some islanders viewed NWP as a structure to keep islanders and detainees separated. For others, NWP's isolation was seen as detrimental by segregating asylum seekers from the outside world.

Marcus considered NWP as a necessary tool for segregating asylum seekers from the island community:

If you are going to come here illegally you have got to be put somewhere. You can't and shouldn't have the run of the island. You shouldn't be able to get off a refugee boat here and say, 'Here I am find me somewhere to live' and walk around the town. So you got to have somewhere. If that be the place and they have got to be kept under lock and key. It's unfortunate but you can't just let them wander [around] the place.⁶²

The government's policy of mandatory detention resulted in some islanders having the belief that their detention is vital. Briskman puts forth a similar idea when speaking of the Australian public perceptions about detention:

Imagery and language created by the government has allowed sections of the community to be convinced that mandatory detention is necessary. The terminology includes invoking the fraudulent concepts of queue jumpers, illegals and floodgates.⁶³

Marcus frequently adopted the word 'illegal' in his interview, and it was offered as an explanation for why asylum seekers should be detained. As McMaster posits: 'In Australia asylum seekers are categorised as illegal

⁶² Interview with Marcus, Christmas Island, 19 September 2008.

⁶³ Linda Briskman, 'Detention as deterrence', in Alperhan Babacan and Linda Briskman (eds) *Asylum Seekers: International Perspectives on Interdiction and Deterrence* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 129.

immigrants, and refugee policy dictates that they have broken the law and are treated accordingly: like criminals.’⁶⁴ Grewcock also notes that asylum seekers are alienated by the state because of their so-called unlawful entry, which leads to them being treated as criminals: ‘The criminality of the refugee rests not in legal fact or due process but in the metaphoric impact of terms such as ‘criminal’ and ‘illegal’ to describe persons whose personae as refugees rightly attract the disciplinary powers of the state.’⁶⁵

Marcus also revealed his distrust of asylum seekers because their true identities were not certain when they first arrived. He gave the following explanation as to why people should remain in detention while their cases were being processed:

I don’t think they should be stuck away for years on end but initially you don’t have a lot of options. The big problem is you get a refugee who comes here and you ask them for their name, ‘Where did you live, where did you come from?’ A lot of those refugees that come are not going to tell you where they come from or their real name. That is difficult.⁶⁶

Unlike some islanders, Marcus did not see the electric fences as inhumane or problematic:

This detention centre is as good as you will ever get. It’s open and breezy and it’s got everything that opens and shuts. It’s got education centres, sewing room, beauty rooms, and gymnasiums.⁶⁷ Okay, it’s got a fence around it, which is probably not good, but you just can’t let people come here illegally and have the run of the place and do what they like.⁶⁸

In a similar sentiment, Elijah said: ‘You’ve gotta ask yourself, if you come in to a foreign land uninvited, that you should have some sort of detaining, so whether it’s razor or a brick fence, it shouldn’t bother them.’⁶⁹ Elijah did not see the detention centre’s structure negatively; rather he described it as having

⁶⁴ McMaster, *Asylum Seekers: Australia’s Response to Refugees*, 190.

⁶⁵ Grewcock, *Border Crimes*, 148.

⁶⁶ Interview with Marcus.

⁶⁷ ‘Beauty rooms’ are a reference to a hair and beauty salon, which was a feature of NWP.

⁶⁸ Interview with Marcus.

⁶⁹ Interview with Elijah.

‘a beautiful hospital, stainless steel, got beautiful kitchens, they’ve got TVs ... the whole thing is just high tech.’⁷⁰

Ella, who had visited NWP, had the following views about NWP’s interior:

I have been out there before it opened because they [Immigration] wanted to do a security [check] ... We had to pretend that we were being detained and go through the security, the metal detectors, and then we were marched over to one of the blocks they put in. They tested things like the fire alarms and things like that ... Honestly, if it wasn’t for the razor wire you would think you were in a university ... It just looks like a campus. The blocks look like class rooms, not from the outside when you have to go in through all of the security, then you look and see that they’ve got some dorms that are quite comfortable, everything is stainless steel. There are no edges, all the lids on the toilets are all beautiful stainless steel, nice cooking area, nice outdoor area, if you just removed the razor wire then it would be a lovely spot.⁷¹

Like Marcus and Elijah, Ella found the interior of the centre impressive. However, where she differed from the previous two participants was that she viewed the razor wire to be inhumane and unnecessary. Her reference to ‘no edges’ related to the centre’s architecture, which attempted to minimise self-harm. She made references several times to the misfortunes that detainees at previous centres had suffered:

Traditionally it [NWP] is like that ‘out of sight out of mind’ mentality, because people could [once] go to the mainland one in the desert, Woomera. People could go there and there were some shocking scenes, just shocking footage that came out on television of people protesting, people hanging on the wire, whereas here it is ‘out of sight out of mind’. They would have to be some very staunch protesters to pay 2500 dollars to get on a plane to come here just to wave a placard. I really do think that it is ‘out of sight out of mind’ here. But the conditions, I would imagine, the facility is much more modern, up to date, than what Woomera was: just razor wire.⁷²

Ella was more concerned about the segregation that NWP created for asylum seekers from the public rather than the boundary it formed between asylum seekers and islanders.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with Ella, Christmas Island, 16 February 2009.

⁷² *ibid.*

While some islanders may have seen the detention of asylum seekers as important, other islanders were alarmed by the inhumane aspect of NWP. This was evident when speaking with Jade, who was offered a job at NWP but refused. She declined an offer of work at NWP because:

Moral and philosophical. I know the person who is managing the set-up, Resolve FM,⁷³ He said I want to give you a job. He actually passed on all my information because I had asked him if he knew of any jobs. I made it clear I didn't want to work for the detention centre ... and he just said why don't you work for us. I said, I'm so scared. I could not live with myself knowing that I'd worked [there].

Through Jade's opinion of NWP, her own responses to asylum seekers became obvious.

I attribute [NWP] to being a concentration camp, and that's the way I see it ... I don't think you should lock people up. I don't think you should have to ... I can't believe that there's so much security and I can't believe that there's such a lack of compassion and understanding of the fact that people that go through terrible conditions to get on some people-smuggling, nasty boat. God knows how long it takes, how long they've got to go without food, clean water whatever. You know a lot of people don't make it.⁷⁴

Ava was bothered by the harsh features of a maximum-security detention centre combined with concerns about the overall costs:

For me, I have family working there [NWP], but in my own personal opinion it's a big waste of money ... Everybody who worked on the construction has said that it looks just like a maximum-security prison! It cost millions and millions of dollars to build that and it really wasn't necessary in any way whatsoever. I think that if they wanted to build something for asylum seekers then it didn't have to be in that capacity and many of the things that are out there are completely unnecessary.⁷⁵

Kelvin Lee visited NWP during his role as shire councillor described what he thought life was like for detainees at NWP:

For me it's like a big sinkhole; you look up and you only see the trees. I have been there on a few occasions and look up and it's just like a big sinkhole! I think it would be a very depressing place ... for any human

⁷³ Resolve FM was contracted by the Immigration Department to deliver maintenance services at NWP.

⁷⁴ Interview with Jade, Christmas Island, 3 November 2008.

⁷⁵ Interview with Ava, Christmas Island, 4 February 2009.

being staying in a place with fences where you don't have the freedom, it would be very sad for a person. You would silence a person, no one would really get to know them and you would become a non-person.⁷⁶

Not only did NWP's architecture impact on detainees' wellbeing, in Kelvin's opinion but it also led to detainees becoming stigmatised by islanders: 'When it is a prison – to people it doesn't sound very nice and people start thinking it must be full of criminals so it tends to have that stigma.'⁷⁷ This stigmatisation that NWP generated is indicative of Grewcock's argument:

The locking up of unauthorised migrants in prison like conditions, often in remote locations, exacerbated their physical separation from the wider Australian community and contributed to their stigmatisation as deviant outsiders, whose individual circumstances were concealed.⁷⁸

The stigmatisation that Grewcock speaks of became apparent during an informal conversation with Jennifer, an islander who worked at NWP. I mentioned to her that I regularly visited detainees. Looking puzzled, she exclaimed, 'People are allowed to visit detainees?' Because of the prison-like appearance of the centre, she said that she did not think islanders were allowed to visit detainees. Jennifer was not the only one with this perception. She mentioned that a number of islanders wished to help the detainees by taking food to them but did not think they were allowed.⁷⁹ On another occasion, confusion about visiting detainees at NWP arose while I worked as a part-time education assistant at the local school teaching asylum seekers. Several times in 2010, I mentioned to teachers who worked with asylum seekers that I visited adult men at NWP. Despite working with asylum seeker children, at least three teachers appeared shocked that detainees at NWP were permitted visitors. As the men were in a 'prison', they assumed that islanders could not contact asylum seekers in this maximum-security facility and that the Immigration Department would not allow visitors.

⁷⁶ Interview with Kelvin Lee.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Grewcock, *Border Crimes*, 147.

⁷⁹ Dimasi, Field notes, Christmas Island, 13 March 2009.

Border economies: Christmas Island's future

Some islanders were not so concerned about the impact NWP might have on those that it detained, but rather their responses were island focused. Participants' responses were themed around the island's future, with a general concern for the island's economy. Some were particularly preoccupied with the island's future and the government's treatment of the island community rather than its treatment of asylum seekers. For example, Choy Lan said:

Well, my opinion is that they have spent so much money on building this project and as a resident here and as a taxpayer; I want to know what are the plans for this project; fill it up with detainees or what? ... It should be utilised. And the community would like to know what is the future for this island? What is the plan? We have been living here, going through the years of limbo; sometime [ago] the mine closed and it was the union who went through a three-year struggle campaign to reopen it ... So, I would like to know if there is a plan for this island.⁸⁰

If the centre accommodated asylum seekers, it enabled islanders to have faith in the island having a stable economic future. Choy Lan was interviewed when the island was in an uncertain period following the global economic crisis, with the mine being shut down over the summer (2008–2009):

Right now we just are not sure what is going to happen because after the break last year, the first since we shut down [in 1987] because of the market situation we don't have enough orders for our product. So in December up to early this month we shut down so when people came back to work they expected to come back to normal but we are still in that same situation in that we don't have constant orders for our products ... I think the worst thing is not knowing what's in the future. They [mine employees] are all concerned because if they have children or grandchildren who are studying in Perth then they need to help with money. They may have a mortgage and just make sure the bills have been paid. Everybody is concerned.⁸¹

Considering Choy Lan's own experiences of the island's history lows, such as the mine's closure during the 1980s, combined with uncertainty surrounding the mine's future it was understandable why she wanted to see NWP accommodate asylum seekers. She added:

⁸⁰ Interview with Choy Lan Seet, Christmas Island, 13 February 2009.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

It has been a bust, boom, bust pattern on the island and I for one would like to see other industries come on board, whether the refugees in the detention centre or an army/naval base I don't care so long as it is being used, or the mine lease be extended for another ten years. The point is that people have got to have employment here to keep the island going then I am happy because I'd like to stay here for as long as I wish. So for refugees, they're welcome. There are proper facilities here for them and it creates employment for the people.⁸²

Similar to Choy Lan, Eric maintained that NWP should be used in order to benefit the island:

For me if you build it and spend so much money then you might as well use it, why not? ... The Christmas Island people need improvement for the island and the economy because we are struggling to get money from the government and the government spent so much money on the detention centre so we might as well use it.

Eric pointed out that the island did not receive enough funding from the government, and that the island had little choice other than look for alternatives to boost its economy with detention being one possible avenue.

Anthony echoed Eric when speaking about NWP and the island's future:

We need something to replace the industry ... Maybe Howard government build refugee centre there to replace mine and then the Rudd government come in and they have different idea. But I think that the government in Canberra should listen to us. He should consult the people here. We as islanders know what is what, not the Canberra office. They are just a group of people who look at a map and say 'you should.'⁸³

Kelvin highlighted how NWP was good for the island's future:

For businesses in the future it [NWP] could be good especially since the mine has a limited life and it's whether the government is going to let the mine have extra land to continue for another decade, making it twenty years.⁸⁴

Elizabeth suggested that the island having no future had been an ongoing issue for the last decade:

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Interview with Anthony. It is not clear whom the 'he' that Anthony refers to is. It is possibly a reference to the Minister of DOTARS, which is also unclear.

⁸⁴ Interview with Kelvin Lee.

I think the government didn't plan for Christmas Island. It's more an Asian country. I remember asking the government ten years ago 'What is your ten year plan for Christmas Island?' Nothing, no planning; one stage people here fighting seriously because they want to have a satellite launch and the government oppose it but the business people support it. We knew that a satellite launch would be good for Christmas Island, but they say no, they are going to have a detention centre on Christmas Island. We want tourism and they talk about it but there is nothing for tourists.⁸⁵

The emplacement of NWP draws a significant parallel with detention with Lampedusa, Italy. This Mediterranean island has been an entry point for asylum seekers into Europe. Somewhat similar to the phosphate industry on Christmas Island, the local fishing industry on Lampedusa has been in crisis. Today, the island community has a vested interest in the economic benefits that undocumented migrants or *clandestini* bring. As when the first boat people arrived on Christmas Island, Lampedusa welcomed the *clandestini* by accommodating, clothing and cooking for the new arrivals. Over time, local reception centres were established and 'spontaneous local hospitality became increasingly institutionalised.'⁸⁶ *Clandestini* were later not only 'invisible' in the way in which they migrated but also through the designated spaces they were detained on Lampedusa. In 2007, a purpose-built detention centre became operational, which was designed to house 800 detainees. The running of the centre was privatised and employed 150 locals, and contributes to the local economy. Despite local complaints of the '*militarization* of the island', security staff deployed to operate the detention centre have stimulated the local economy by injecting revenue into hotels and restaurants.⁸⁷

In her work on the emerging migration industry on Lampedusa, Heidrun Friese investigates how border economies operate within border regimes where 'a multitude of local and (supra)national actors, whose practices relate to each other without though being ordered by a central logic or rationality.'⁸⁸ This argument is applicable to the case of Christmas Island. It is here various actors operating within Christmas Island's 'border economy' are visible.

⁸⁵ Interview with Lola.

⁸⁶ Heidrun Friese, 'Border Economies: Lampedusa and the nascent migration industry', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012):73.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 67.

These actors include construction companies and multinational security companies that operate NWP to the islanders, including local business owners who wish to profit from the funds that the detention industry injects into the island's economy, giving them a sense of future. For example, when NWP was opened the Christmas Island Chamber of Commerce president John Richardson told the *Australian* that asylum seekers 'bring jobs and they bring a good cash flow to the island, so you won't get a lot of heat from the business community [over NWP opening]'.⁸⁹

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the critical events relating to the construction and opening of NWP. The first section of the chapter showed that the Christmas Island community was inadequately consulted when it came to the construction of a maximum-security detention centre. The second section of the chapter addressed islanders' responses towards asylum seekers through a discussion on the opening of NWP. For some islanders, the invisibility of asylum seekers that NWP brings is crucial for segregating the community from 'illegal' and 'uninvited' asylum seekers. For other islanders, the invisibility that a maximum-security facility manufactures is concerning when they consider the human rights of detainees who are subjected to mandatory detention.

By examining the history of NWP, it is not only islander responses to asylum seekers that are evident but also their concerns for the island's future and its economical situation. For some islanders, responses towards asylum seekers shifted away from one of welcoming and hospitality that existed earlier but rather how the community might benefit from what Frieze terms a 'border economy'.

A feature of this era in the island's history was the invisibility of asylum seekers through their detention at NWP, and criticisms directed at government policy. Chapter Nine explores what happened when asylum seekers became more visible to locals through the government's policy of community detention, which coincided with the opening of NWP.

⁸⁹ Perpetch, 'Boat people won't miss festive cheer', 5.

CHAPTER NINE

Community Detention: 2008 to 2010

After the announcement of the Detention Values, the government moved towards detaining asylum seekers in the community, including the Christmas Island community. In October 2008, the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy was put to the test when the first boats arrived and processing began on Christmas Island. This chapter explores how the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policy played out, particularly community detention and how islanders responded to asylum seekers who arrived during the period from 2008 to 2010.

In the first section of the chapter, I discuss the first boat arrivals to come to Christmas Island under the Rudd Government. I consider local responses that centre on fear and security and concerns about community detainees. I draw on academic sources, media reports and parliamentary documents. I draw on my own ethnographic fieldwork such as witnessing boat arrivals. I also take into account community bulletins that were disseminated on the island by the Immigration Department and the island administrator.

Local action from 2008 to 2010 was strong, which the second section addresses. It explores 'criminality', 'fear', 'burden' and 'strain on resources' by drawing on the work of both Hubbard and Klocker and Jacobsen's work on host communities. Interviews with Christmas Island residents and material from the *Islander* and local community bulletins are interpreted in relation to notions of 'criminality', 'fear', 'burden' and 'strain on resources', while Christmas Islander perceptions about asylum seekers receiving preferential treatment are looked at.¹

¹ Phil Hubbard, ' "Inappropriate and incongruous": Opposition to asylum centres in the English countryside', *Journal of Rural Studies* 21 (2005): 3–17; Natascha Klocker, 'Community antagonism towards asylum seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia', *Australian Geographical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2004): 1–17; Karen Jacobsen 'Factors influencing the policy responses of host governments to mass refugee influxes *International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 655–78.

First boat arrivals

The first boat to arrive under the Rudd Government occurred on 2 October 2008. Twelve asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iran and two Indonesian crew were intercepted at Ashmore Reef by Australian Customs and Border Protection and brought to Christmas Island for processing. I witnessed first hand the naval vessel ACV *Triton* bring them to Flying Fish Cove. During the boat arrival, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) blocked the public from entering the jetty. Only staff from the Immigration Department, GSL, medical service providers and interpreters were permitted to be present. A few islanders watched the arrival from the Cove's foreshore while some Kampong residents observed from their balconies. Completely unaware of the imminent boat arrival, one snorkeller was instructed by an AFP officer to get out of the water. The majority of the people present for the arrival were the 39 detention industry staff flown from the mainland on a Hercules plane the previous night. The arrival of these detention staff was announced in a community bulletin that the Immigration Department published on the island:

Fourteen people intercepted on a boat near the Ashmore Islands earlier this week arrived on Christmas Island on 2 October 2008. As Christmas Island Immigration operations are run on a contingency basis when a response is necessary, the Australian government flies in a range of staff. A number of government agencies are involved in the government's response to any unauthorised boat arrival and associated processing and investigation. Officers and contracted staff, including interpreters and health staff, will be undertaking health, security and identity checks to establish the group's identities and reasons for travelling.²

Asylum seekers were ferried from the ACV *Triton* to the jetty by a barge that was driven by a local stevedore. They were searched and put on to a bus. They smiled and waved at onlookers, including myself, as the bus drove them to the detention centre. A similar event took place again on 10 October, when the HMAS *Larrakia* brought 14 asylum seekers and three Indonesian crew to Christmas Island after their sinking boat was found tied to an oil rig in the Timor Sea. This arrival was reported in the Immigration Department's community bulletin:

² DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 3 October 2008.

Seventeen people intercepted on a vessel in the Timor Sea arrived on Christmas Island today (10 October 2008). The Australian Government response team will be undertaking health, security and identity checks to establish their identities and reasons for travelling. The group will be held in detention on Christmas Island. In line with government policy, juveniles will not be accommodated in an Immigration Detention Centre.³

In the months that followed these two boat arrivals, I regularly witnessed asylum seekers disembark on Christmas Island. Generally, the process was the same: the Australian Navy or Customs intercepted a 'suspected irregular entry vessel (SIEV)' and then transported the SIEV's passengers to Christmas Island. Upon arrival at the jetty, an immigration officer informed asylum seekers that, as they had arrived unauthorised in Australia, they were now detained under the Migration Act. Asylum seekers were searched on the jetty and their property seized by Australian Customs before being transported by bus to the Phosphate Hill detention centre for processing.

From detention to the Christmas Island community

After the first few boat arrivals, the immigration minister told the Senate that he opposed 'indefinite detention' and that the department would not detain people indefinitely if they 'do not pose a risk'.⁴ The Rudd Government built upon the previous government's community detention policy, where in 2005 the Migration Act was amended to give the immigration minister the power to grant 'residence determination' to people who were currently being detained in immigration detention centres.⁵ Community arrangements took place in the form of either bridging visas or community detention.⁶

On 20 November 2008, after being detained for seven weeks at Construction Camp, five Afghan unaccompanied minors (UAMs) were released into the Christmas Island community. They were moved into two houses located in

³ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 10 October 2008.

⁴ Chris Evans, 'Supplementary Budget Estimates', Standing Committee on Legal Constitutional Affairs, Senate, 21 October 2008, 132.

⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Community arrangements for asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons: Observations from visits conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission from December 2011 to May 2012', 14, accessed 4 May 2014, www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human_rights/immigration/2012community-arrangements/community_based_arrangements.pdf.

⁶ *ibid.*

the Drumsite neighbourhood and were cared for by two Afghan male carers deployed to the island by Families South Australia, a social services organisation contracted by the Immigration Department to provide care and support to unaccompanied minors. On 3 December 2008, two Afghan families and an Iranian husband and wife moved into the community. They were also accommodated in the Drumsite neighbourhood, on the same street as the UAMs. The houses that the UAMs and families resided in were Commonwealth properties, with some located next door to and opposite Christmas Island residents' homes. Not long after the asylum seekers moved into these properties, the Immigration Department erected signs at the front of each house that warned that these houses belonged to the Commonwealth and that trespassing was an offence. In late December, the single adult males from the first two boats also moved into community detention. Accommodated at Silver City, the men lived in apartments owned by the Commonwealth. Representatives from Red Cross were brought to the island to assist the families and adults while they were in community detention.

By late December 2008, a total of 26 asylum seekers lived among local residents in the Christmas Island community. They were often seen at public places such as the supermarket, the Cove, the hospital and at community events held around the island. For example, when the UAMs were first released into the community, I saw them at a Chinese community celebration at South Point Temple. On other occasions, I observed the UAMs at the local recreation centre, the gym and the soccer ground located at the school oval. They went on excursions exploring the island and were always accompanied by their carers. The adults and families did not have access to vehicle transport and were often seen walking around the island. As the families and single adult men lived in different neighbourhoods, they would often walk to one another's homes to visit each other and sometimes return quite late at night.

Fear and security concerns

On 19 December 2008, three male Sri Lankan asylum seekers from the Phosphate Hill IDC escaped, after hearing that their claims for asylum were

rejected and that they were facing deportation. They later claimed they were searching for a Catholic priest to help them.⁷ The community blackboard warned locals: 'Three escaped detainees: do not approach the men', and call 000 if sighted'. On the day of the escape, many islanders talked about the incident, with some expressing nervousness. For example, one woman told some islanders that she was now too afraid to go for her regular early morning walks in case the men confronted her. Some islanders locked their houses and cars, which is an uncommon practice on Christmas Island. These fears were short lived after a local resident found the Sri Lankans near the high school 20 hours after they escaped. The Immigration Department noted on its website: 'Local authorities, the AFP and detention staff together worked closely with the local community throughout the day and as a result, the men were found safe and well.'⁸

From the time the first asylum seekers went into community up until late January 2009, no public information was disseminated by either the island administrator or the Immigration Department about community detention. It was not until after these 26 asylum seekers had departed that information about the community detention program was distributed in the form of a Q&A bulletin. The movement of asylum seekers around the island and their visibility in everyday island life resulted in islanders contacting the island administrator's office to ask questions and raise concerns about asylum seekers. In response to these concerns, on 30 January 2009, the island administrator published a community bulletin.

A question about what is the health status of asylum seekers living in the community was published in the bulletin. The response to this was: 'Unauthorised boat arrivals undergo extensive health testing when they come to Christmas Island. They are also subject to broad health screening to ensure that there are no public health concerns.'⁹ The bulletin also described which

⁷ Paige Taylor, 'Sri Lankan asylum seekers in breakout from Christmas Island', *Australian*, 14 April 2009.

⁸ DIAC, 'Media Release: Detainees Found Safe and Well on Christmas Island', DIAC Website, 20 December 2008, accessed 11 September 2011, www.newsroom.immi.gov.au/media_releases/665.

⁹ Office of the Administrator Indian Ocean Territories, 'Q&A about Detainees-in-the-community', A01/2009, 30 January 2009, 2.

asylum seekers might be permitted into the community and made clear that asylum seekers were not a threat to the community:

[Community detention] has now been in operation for three years and has allowed children and their families, unaccompanied minors, victims of torture and trauma, and people who have cleared health, identity and security checking to live in the community while their immigration status is resolved.¹⁰

The issue of 'personal safety and property' was also referred to in the bulletin. One concern was: 'We are worried about our personal safety and property. There are groups of men walking around the streets quite late. We are wary because it is not usual to see that on this island, so we are locking our doors.'¹¹ According to the bulletin, this happened because community detainees were 'not aware that their movements around the town were causing fear and concern'. Once community detainees were 'made aware of the community's concerns they modified their behaviour' and now 'walk in much smaller groups and generally not out after dark'.¹²

Another concern in the bulletin was, 'The detainees have a lot of attractive items – like iPods, expensive designer brand sunglasses.'¹³ The administrator's office responded:

People in community detention are provided with furnished accommodation and given a small allowance to provide for everyday living expenses. On Christmas Island, the allowance is NOT given cash in hand. Some discretionary cash is made available but the majority of the allowances is via accounts or controlled purchases (e.g. food, clothing and shoes) at local traders. The care groups and DIAC oversight spending.¹⁴

As the number of asylum seekers to arrive on Christmas Island increased, so did local concerns. From the first boat arrival in October to May 2009, Christmas Island received 22 boats carrying 747 passengers,¹⁵ with 150 people

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 3.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵ Andrew Metcalfe, 'Budget Estimates: Tabled Document No. 5, Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee, Senate, 25 May 2009.

receiving visas and settled on mainland Australia.¹⁶ By May 2009, the Christmas Island local population was still around 1,300 residents, while 459 asylum seekers were detained on the island.¹⁷

There were 266 DIAC staff and contractors who also resided on the island, which benefited local businesses.¹⁸ While detention industry staff bolstered the local economy, accommodation and rental shortages were common. By May 2009, all Immigration accommodation was completely occupied, leading to detention staff being accommodated in tourist accommodation. The Christmas Island Lodge in Poon Saan was fully occupied by detention workers to the point that officers had to share rooms.¹⁹ Accommodation shortages created new challenges for the community detention program. As the Immigration Department needed government accommodation for its own staff, it backed away from detaining asylum seekers in the community to overcome its own challenge of finding accommodation.²⁰

Evidence of local discontent over asylum seekers was apparent when the Immigration Department held a community outreach meeting at the recreation centre on 18 May 2009. Residents voiced concerns over asylum seekers receiving better treatment than locals and the impact of the detention centre.²¹ One islander said, 'DIAC is loving and caring of refugees', yet the local community was not being 'looked after', thereby indicating concern about the lack of community consultation, given that this was the first community meeting held since the first boat arrival seven months ago. He also stated that the detention centre industry was impacting on local infrastructure, car hire and accommodation.²²

¹⁶ Immigration and Citizenship Portfolio, 'Budget Estimates: Question Taken on Notice (67): Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee, Senate, 27–28 May 2009.

¹⁷ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 14 May 2009.

¹⁸ Gordon Thomson, Personal notes made from shire meeting with DIAC, UCIW Archives, 27 May 2009.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ By June 2010, community detention on Christmas Island completely ceased.

²¹ I was not on island when the community meeting was held. I have relied on how this event was retold to me by locals and recorded notes kept in the UCIW Archives made by a UCIW representative who was present at the meeting (UCIW, 'DIAC Community Meeting', UCIW Archives, 18 May 2009).

²² UCIW, 'DIAC Community Meeting', UCIW Archives, 18 May 2009.

Community concerns over food were also raised at the meeting. One resident said that the cost of food had gone up and that islanders were 'struggling'.²³ He expressed annoyance that asylum seeker children were supposedly throwing away uneaten fruit that 'they received for free', which made the local children 'feel bad'.²⁴ Another islander stated that when North West Point (NWP) detention centre was under construction and there were 700 contractors on island, food issues never existed, as Boulderstone brought its own shipping containers to the island.²⁵

Issues around the offloading of local freight cargo were also raised. One islander said that local freight was being offloaded and preference given to freight that Immigration shipped to the island. He used the example that islanders had waited three months for meat to be shipped that had been offloaded at the wharf in Fremantle.

Some islanders complained that the male asylum seekers who attended the local school were not children but actually adults. One islander expressed disbelief that these asylum seekers were under 18. Another islander wanted to know what guarantees the Immigration Department could provide to ensure that these asylum seekers were children.

Less than two weeks after the community outreach meeting, Secretary of DIAC Andrew Metcalfe described the Immigration Department's relationship with the local community:

We have been working very closely with the key people on the island – the council, the representatives of the territories focused on the Attorney-General's Department and the local school. The headmaster has been doing a wonderful job up there in relation to some of the young men who have arrived here. We have identified, though, that we need to strengthen our community engagement. We clearly have a significant presence on the island and a major impact on the economy in a positive way, ironically, as well as impacting on issues such as supplies.²⁶

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Andrew Metcalfe, 'Budget Estimates', Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee, Senate, 28 May 2009, 104.

What became apparent after the outreach meeting was the need for better communication and consultation by the Immigration Department with the Christmas Island community. Several measures were put in place, including the establishment of a Community Reference Group (CRG) where community representatives met monthly with DIAC. Some of the main community concerns discussed by the group at the first few meetings were the high cost of food prices, the availability of airline seats for the community and the shortage of rental accommodation. The community was also advised that the recruitment of a community liaison officer (CLO) would take place. The principal priority of the CLO was 'to engage with the broader Christmas Island community and develop activities which bring the community, DIAC clients, and government and service provider employees together at various levels.'²⁷ The CLO was not appointed until March 2010, as there were difficulties in finding a suitable applicant for the role. A DIAC feedback email address was also made available which was 'a single point of contact for residents to contact the Department'.²⁸

By early March 2010, 1,863 people were detained across the three detention centres.²⁹ The detention population continued to increase steadily throughout 2010, and by late October 2010 2,838 detainees were on the island, with around 2,000 held at NWP, a centre built for only 800 people.³⁰ With this many asylum seekers on the island, the pressure on local infrastructure intensified. Following a meeting with the local community a few weeks earlier, the minister acknowledged the problems:

I was out there a couple of weeks ago and met with the administrator of the island, community leaders, the shire president et cetera and talked about the fact that we accepted that we were putting a strain on infrastructure there and that we wanted to be good community citizens and put back into the island. I think the view of

²⁷ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Shire Vacancy: Community Liaison Officer', Public Notice 26/09, Christmas Island 24 July 2009.

²⁸ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 21 July 2009.

²⁹ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 2 March 2010.

³⁰ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 29 October 2010.

the local leadership is very much that they want some lasting benefit from the presence on the island.³¹

From March 2010, every community bulletin featured an accommodation update by the Immigration Department. The purpose of these updates was explained by the department.

Given how tight the accommodation situation on CI is, future community updates will include information about what accommodation is being used by DIAC. We hope that this information will demonstrate that DIAC is minimising its use of housing that would otherwise be available to the CI community.³²

In April 2010, in response to the impact the detention industry had on the island, the government announced plans to open new and reopen additional detention centres on the mainland. These centres were Curtin IDC (Western Australia), Northern Immigration IDC (Darwin) and Port Augusta immigration residential housing (South Australia). The Immigration Department stated that mainland immigration centres were opened ‘in order to ease pressure on the Christmas Island community and the detention facilities’.³³ Additionally, the government planned to move more asylum seekers into mainland community detention under residence determination, particularly for UAMs and families, and also to open alternative places of detention such as Inverbrackie (South Australia). A community bulletin stated: ‘The department believes this will go a long way to helping manage the issue of overcrowding on Christmas Island and bring back suitable levels of client amenities to clients who remain on in the facilities on Christmas Island.’³⁴

Community bulletins published in 2010 reveal that community engagement was central to this period, with the Immigration Department working towards being part of the island community. For example, bulletins provided information about Immigration staff, such names of those who had arrived on the island, and a ‘Getting to Know You’ personal interview with a DIAC staff

³¹ Chris Evans, ‘Additional Estimates’, Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Senate, 9 February 2010, 155.

³² DIAC, ‘Community Update’, Christmas Island, 5 March 2010.

³³ DIAC, ‘Community Update’, Christmas Island, 30 April 2010.

³⁴ DIAC, ‘Community Update’, Christmas Island, 24 December 2010.

member. Farewell letters by senior staff were also published. When senior staff members left the island, community updates highlighted their contribution to the island community. Community bulletins regularly published articles about how the Immigration Department was contributing to the island through fundraising and supporting events. In July 2010, DIAC donated \$19,000 to the Christmas Island Cricket Club for a project called 'One Island, One Team.'³⁵ DIAC staff was involved in 'after school programs, working with a youth rock band, undertaking furniture restoration, and volunteering in at the opportunity shop, the golf club and the airport kiosk'.³⁶

Prior to the detention industry existing on Christmas Island, employment opportunities were few. The phosphate mine had long been the largest employer on the island and future employment positions were limited. If a resident did not work at the mine, the shire, the local school or own a local business it was not uncommon for them to work several casual jobs to supplement a full-time salary. A key development of 2010 was the increase in the number of islanders employed at the detention industry, with the detention industry replacing the phosphate mine as the main employer on island. Throughout 2010, DIAC published community bulletins about traineeships and administration assistant positions with the Immigration Department while Serco and Resolve FM, the maintenance company contracted to DIAC, frequently published job vacancies in the *Islander*. Speaking of the increase in local employment, Immigration Minister Evans told the Senate:

One of the things we have been very keen to do – and I have pushed very hard – is to provide local employment. There was quite large unemployment, particularly among the Malay and Chinese populations on the island, and we have encouraged Serco and the other contractors to employ locally and we have started to take some steps ourselves. Serco is currently employing about 30 local staff ... I think the catering contractors have about 25 local staff. Facilities and maintenance contractors have about 40 or more staff. We have recruited three in facilities management roles. What we are trying to do is show there is some benefit to the island as well, and that is

³⁵ Community Reference Group, 'Meeting minutes', UCIW Archives, 28 July 2010.

³⁶ Chris Evans, 'Budget Estimates', Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Senate, 26 May 2010, 7.

reflected in employment. It was certainly acknowledged while I was there that the community are very pleased that we are actually employing locals, and that of course has enormous economic benefit on the island.³⁷

With the move towards local employment came a significant change in how islanders referred to asylum seekers. Under the Rudd Government, asylum seekers in detention were officially referred to by the Immigration Department as 'clients'. During the early stages of fieldwork in 2008 to 2009, this term was not in circulation among islanders. It was rare to hear islanders use the term 'asylum seeker'. Instead they referred to them as 'refugees' or 'reffos'. As Neumann points out, 'reffo' was a derogatory term that surfaced during the late 1930s when Jewish refugees were resettled in Australia.³⁸ However, among islanders the word 'reffo' appeared to be more of an abbreviation than an insult when used by locals. Throughout 2010, there was a significant shift in how islanders referred to asylum seekers. Islanders replaced the words 'refugee' and 'reffo' with 'client'. This shift in language occurred for two reasons. The first is that as this term was frequently used by DIAC in its community bulletins, islanders became accustomed to it, and this shift coincided with DIAC's strong presence on the island. The second reason is because many locals gained employment at the detention centre where it was standard practice to use this term. No longer were asylum seekers 'refugees' or 'reffos', but rather a commodity that was central to the Christmas Island 'border economy'.³⁹

Understanding Christmas Islander responses to asylum seekers

The literature about community responses to asylum seekers both internationally and in Australia provides some leads as to why islanders responded the way they did from 2008 to 2010. In some rural communities of the United Kingdom (UK), local residents have expressed similar concerns to those of islanders. Hubbard investigates how residents responded to the

³⁷ Chris Evans, 'Additional Estimates', Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, 9 February 2010, 155.

³⁸ Klaus Neumann, *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), 25.

³⁹ Heidrun Friese, 'Border Economies: Lampedusa and the nascent migration industry', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2012): 66–84.

British Government's proposal to develop asylum seeker accommodation clusters in the rural communities of Nottingham and Oxfordshire. Under the UK's 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act new immigration controls were introduced where 'destitute' asylum seekers would be dispersed throughout the UK to accommodation clusters, while welfare payments would be replaced with vouchers for clothes and living expenses.⁴⁰ The government's accommodation cluster proposal was met with resistance from rural residents. Residents perceived asylum seekers as being a dangerous threat to rural communities and 'local quality of life'.⁴¹ In a similar way that Christmas Island is often depicted by islanders, Hubbard explains that rural localities are often imagined to be 'safe, family spaces' by its residents.⁴²

Numerous protests were held by rural residents in response to the UK Government's accommodation cluster proposal. These protests ranged from public meetings with local councils, a silent vigil, and a 9,000-signature petition sent to the government.⁴³ Concerns that emerged from these protests centred on residents' fears over their personal safety, and concerns about crime and disturbances. For example, in a statement made by the Shelford and Newton Parish Council, it said that there were 'fears' over 'large numbers of people wandering around the area, particularly during the daytime when existing residents could be expected to be away from their homes'.⁴⁴ The source of such anxieties over asylum seekers is the focus of Hubbard's investigation.

Hubbard undertook a detailed discourse analysis of the hundreds of letters submitted by residents to local councils in response to the accommodation cluster proposal. He identified that local protests were constructed around 'particular distinctions of Self/Other'.⁴⁵ It was evident that within these protests, a community seeks to 'defend its boundaries' or keep out a 'perceived threat', and that 'geographies of exclusion' emerge. In order to maintain self-identity, people 'seek to defend their body, home and

⁴⁰ Phil Hubbard, 'Inappropriate and incongruous', 3.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 10.

neighbourhood in response to the incursion of abject Others who appear to threaten the boundaries of individual and collective identity.’⁴⁶ It is through these fears of the Other that certain groups are depicted as ‘deviant and dangerous’ by hegemonic society.⁴⁷

The actual sites that the Other is associated with become places of community opposition and resentment. This has also been noted by Takahashi who says community members may stigmatise those in need of accessing human service facilities through defining them as non-productive and dangerous. The actual sites of human service facilities also become places of stigmatisation.⁴⁸ Rural community responses to the accommodation cluster proposal reveal a stigmatisation of asylum seekers that also extends to the actual clusters that the asylum seekers are proposed to inhabit.

The first discourse that Hubbard identified in his study was the idea that asylum seekers are non-productive. A perception among rural residents existed that centred on the idea that asylum seekers would not contribute to the local economy and would be a burden to the community. Some residents believed that the asylum seekers would take from the local community and do nothing productive in return, while others saw them as ‘freeloaders’ or ‘cheats’.⁴⁹ The second discourse that became apparent was personal culpability, in the sense that asylum seekers only had themselves to blame for the circumstances in which they found themselves, and had migrated to the United Kingdom by personal choice. The third discourse identified was the idea of criminality. Hubbard explains that a widespread fear prevailed, as residents believed that the accommodation clusters would ‘fuel criminality’. For example, one rural resident from Piddington wrote:

Nobody knows the backgrounds of these people – whether they have criminal records or are violent or abusive or will abscond. During the day they will have little to do but wander round the villages in groups

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Lois Takahashi, ‘The socio-spatial stigmatization of homelessness and HIV/AIDS: Toward an explanation of the NIMBY syndrome’, *Social Science & Medicine* 45, no. 6 (1997): 903–914.

⁴⁹ Hubbard, ‘Inappropriate and incongruous’, 10–11.

which will be intimidating for the adults, traumatic for the elderly and turn children's play spaces into no-go areas.⁵⁰

Hubbard points out that residents expressed concern over their personal safety at night; their homes when they were not there during the day; and fears about their own children playing unsupervised in the community. He notes that one parent wrote: 'How can I let my children out with the thought of these youths wandering around our countryside with no thought for our customs and culture?'⁵¹ Some residents believed that their own daughters would be attacked by young male asylum seekers walking around the countryside. For example, one resident wrote: 'Local schools will become a magnet for young male asylum seekers. How can we let our daughters go out and play?' Another resident stated: 'If these are all single young men, I pity the young girls of the town.'⁵² Furthermore, some residents were concerned that their own communities would become stigmatised through place identity in that the community would be negatively associated with asylum seekers in general.⁵³

Community responses in Port Augusta

Turning to Australia, negative local community responses to asylum seekers are evident when considering Klocker's work on the Port Augusta community's hostile responses to asylum seekers. In 2001, the Howard Government announced that Baxter detention centre would be opened in Port Augusta, South Australia. The methodology for Klocker's study comprised of sending a postal questionnaire to Port Augusta residents to obtain information about residents' attitudes towards asylum seekers. Participant responses were gathered by asking questions about asylum seekers and providing participants with a selection of answers to choose from that ranged from negative to positive constructions of 'asylum seekers' characteristics, behaviour, arrival and impact on Australia'.⁵⁴ Klocker explains that by drawing on a social construction approach, problematic constructed stereotypes assigned to minority groups such as asylum seekers can be better understood. She argues

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Klocker, 'Community antagonism', 4.

that it is through a discourse of Self/Other binary that these constructs play out where the immigrant Other is distinguished from the illusionary 'Anglo-Celtic Australian' Self.

Klocker's study revealed that respondents from the Port Augusta community had very negative perceptions of asylum seekers. It was identified by respondents that 82% saw them as 'illegal immigrants' and 79% as 'unlawful'.⁵⁵ Over 70% respondents identified asylum seekers as an 'economic burden', a 'problem', 'unwelcome' and 'ungrateful'.⁵⁶ Respondents also mentioned that the presence of asylum seekers would be 'of detriment to the Port Augusta community'.⁵⁷

In the open section of the questionnaire, Klocker found that the main descriptor referred to by respondents was 'burden'. Moreover, her study revealed that the frequency of the term 'burden' was often associated with the perceived impact the Baxter detention centre would have on the Port Augusta community. She noted that terms like 'strain on resources', 'unwanted' and 'problem' often featured in questionnaire responses.⁵⁸ The study also found that locals were worried about the strain the detention centre would put on already stretched health and police resources.⁵⁹ Additionally, given that many respondents perceived asylum seekers as a threat, concerns over the Baxter detention centre were specifically linked to issues of security and safety.⁶⁰

One theme evident in Klocker's study was around constructions of the Self and expressions of territorial ownership. Port Augusta has a declining population with high unemployment. Questionnaire responses revealed that the locals regard themselves as 'disadvantaged by an apparent shortage of government services, *inter alia* in health, security and education'.⁶¹ These concerns were 'regularly articulated as part of the powerful "Self/Other" binary around which the asylum seeker discourse of Port Augusta residents

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 9.

was constructed.’⁶² Negative representations of asylum seekers such as ‘burden’ were often juxtaposed with constructions of the Self that centred on being disadvantaged by the existence of asylum seekers.⁶³ The language of territorial ownership was present through this ‘Self/Other’ binary in local community responses. Respondents used terms such as ‘our community’ or ‘our town’ when asked about asylum seekers, which she concludes ‘constructions of the ‘Self’ provided a point of reference against which to position asylum seekers.’⁶⁴

As will be soon shown, this Self/Other binary surfaced when negative representations of asylum seekers were mentioned by islanders. Considering the Q&A community bulletin mentioned earlier and drawing on both Hubbard and Klocker’s research, islanders’ responses are explored in the following section.

Islander fears and criminality

In a not dissimilar way to the case of the rural residents’ responses in the UK and in Port Augusta, discourses around fear and criminality were evident in interviews conducted with islanders. As shown earlier, some rural residents worried about their safety at night and their own homes when they were out all day as they believed that asylum seekers would be left to roam the countryside. A similar concern existed on the island. The Q&A bulletin made clear that islanders had concerns over personal safety and asylum seekers wandering around the community. Shire President Gordon Thomson spoke of islander concerns about the free movement of asylum seekers. He referred to a community meeting in January 2009:

Cathy raised the issue of all these young men roaming the island and their children, their daughters, were at risk, or potentially at risk, because these are unknown quantities. So I thought, oh Christ, you know, what about when you’ve got a dozen tourists or what have you. They can’t do anything about Serco and DIAC men wandering around, but we can oppress these 12 refugees. Well we raised it. I raised it in a meeting ... The curfew was introduced ... The

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 10.

Department are taking account of the community's views, and that is impacting on the lives of the detainees.⁶⁵

When three Sri Lankans escaped from the Phosphate Hill IDC in late December 2008, Cathy told my mother that she was upset, as it was the first day of the school holidays and she had to keep her children inside. In the UK and Port Augusta case studies, it was shown that residents distinguished themselves from asylum seekers through a Self/Other binary where the Self was constructed as the victim as a result of asylum seeker activity. This discourse is evident in Cathy's response. She differentiates between herself and asylum seekers based on a perception that asylum seekers are of criminal nature and threaten her children's safety.

Concerns about the movement of asylum seekers were evident when James was interviewed:

This *was* a very safe community. Right now, it's not very safe. For example, the government hands out the people in community detention a curfew. That's not true, you can see groups of men walking around at 10 o'clock at night, people you don't know. They're probably not bad people, but we don't know that. And why tell us that there's a curfew if there isn't one? ... It's not being enforced. Whereas before my wife could walk down the street, go for a walk at night, but not now.⁶⁶

The theme of fear and criminality surfaced during an interview with Irene. She stressed that asylum seekers who resided in the community made her feel nervous. To understand why that was the case, some insight into Irene's personal views about Christmas Island is first necessary. Irene is one of the few remaining islanders who are island born. Her father migrated from China to the island where he was employed by the British Phosphate Commission. Most of Irene's family members left the island and moved to Perth, where she still visits them each year. Speaking of being away from the island when visiting family in Perth she commented:

Of course, I miss the island. Because I've been living here. It's my home town, you know, everything is so secure here. No need to worry, wherever you go, which way you turn ... you feel more comfortable.

⁶⁵ Interview with Gordon Thomson, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁶⁶ Interview with James, Christmas Island, 27 November 2009.

In Perth it's different, wherever you go, there are strangers passing by.⁶⁷

Irene saw Christmas Island in much the same way as the countryside is often imagined as a safe and family space.⁶⁸ She said:

People are friendlier. You don't have to think when you get out of your car, you have to lock your car, or your door, your house. You don't have to worry about anything. You can just walk off. When you come back, things are still here.⁶⁹

When asked about the community detainees, Irene responded:

I think they should be locked up because they're refugees. Not hanging around here. Sometimes it's really scary to see them because you never know what the background is. Even though they come to you, say hello, this and this, what they're thinking at the back you never know. Like we here, local people, we know each other: 'I know what you're thinking, what your next step is gonna be.' But these people, from outside, you never know what they're gonna do.⁷⁰

Irene's response echoed those of concerned rural residents in Hubbard's study. Responses such as these indicate a distinction is made between the 'islander Self' and the 'asylum seeker Other.' This difference is based on islanders' beliefs that asylum seekers backgrounds are unknown. Furthermore, islanders perceive themselves as law-abiding, non-threatening and non-criminal, while asylum seekers are seen as potential trouble makers that cannot be trusted. The lack of knowledge that some islanders had about community detainees offers a partial explanation as to why these negative attitudes towards asylum seekers existed. This was acknowledged in the Q&A community bulletin:

In part, the worries about security come from not knowing about the people in community detention or their culture... We hope, however, that improving communication will alleviate some people's immediate concerns and enable a return to normal activities.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Interview with Irene, Christmas Island, 27 February 2009.

⁶⁸ Hubbard, 'Inappropriate and incongruous', 4.

⁶⁹ Interview with Irene.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Office of the Administrator, 'Q&A about detainees-in-the-community', 3.

Emily said:

Some people have been saying what's going on with security of the island, what's this, that and the other so she [the administrator]⁷² put out something to let people know but I think that needs to happen beforehand, before people ask ... You know, this is *our island*, you need to remember, so you [the government] need to let us know what's going on.⁷³

Emily was referring to the Q&A bulletin. Her choice of words 'our island' parallels with the Port Augusta case study, where residents claimed territorial ownership over their town. This territorial claim to Christmas Island explains why she argued that the government should provide islanders information about community detainees. The use of 'our island' also reflects a demarcation between who is an islander and who is not. In this instance asylum seekers are not considered to be part of the island community.

Dennis's research into Christmas Island has made reference to this difference between who is an islander or not when she analyses human–animal relationships and metaphors. She writes of the Yellow Crazy Ant, an introduced species that poses a threat to red crabs.⁷⁴ The yellow ants represent infection and invasion and are often spoken about by islanders 'in terms of illness.'⁷⁵ She argues that this can be understood as an invasion metaphor where islanders metaphorically stand as the innocent crabs while the ants are the asylum seekers or 'alien arrivals' from the sea.⁷⁶

The demarcation between islanders and asylum seekers was exemplified by James:

Where do you basically swamp a community anywhere in Australia, and triple its numbers without consulting the community ... They [the government] don't care about me and my community. This is my community and I'm very happy to have asylum seekers here. But, it has to be a balance ... and it's really because everything you see here is disrespectful. It has to do with respect. The government does not respect the community because they don't ask the community. They

⁷² Cheryl Klaffer was acting in the administrator's role at this time.

⁷³ Interview with Emily, Christmas Island, 11 March 2011.

⁷⁴ Simone Dennis, 'Of crustacean blood and ant infection: Life in the migration exclusion zone, Christmas Island, Australia', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 20, (2009): 222-223.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 222.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 224.

are very secretive about what they do. They are so secretive, that we are forced to speculate, and then they complain that we speculate. Well, if you don't tell the community what's going on, we will speculate.⁷⁷

Speculation about asylum seekers was not only confined to those in the community, but also those at NWP detention centre. Ava noted rumours circulated when people were ill-informed about asylum seekers:

Well you don't hear much and I think that's part of the problem ... You don't know what is happening to those people [asylum seekers] and I think that's when people start to gossip ... You get rumours like, 'They are all getting visas, they just come in then fly out' ... The other thing you hear is that it's not safe because of all the young men. People are scared that young men will be let loose in the community. They are scared for their daughters, that kind of thing.⁷⁸

Kelvin Lee commented that some islanders spread rumours about asylum seekers. When asked whether this was in relation to the lack of consultation with the local community on the Immigration Department's behalf, he responded, 'The consultation process is not really good but we do have community information so it is improving, that's all I can say ... Hopefully this CLO will work out well and communication will increase.'⁷⁹

Jasni maintained that the government simply did not care about the island despite local residents raising issues that were impacting on them:

We are just a small person in Australia ... They [the government] don't care how many you are, whatever comment you make, they already decide what they want to do. To us we only can make noise but tomorrow we still got to go on with our lives.⁸⁰

Hubbard's research revealed that some rural residents were concerned over young asylum seeker men harassing local young women.⁸¹ A similar concern arose on Christmas Island where some islanders perceived that the unaccompanied male minors presented a threat to the local female school children. Some local parents were worried about their daughters mixing with

⁷⁷ Interview with James.

⁷⁸ Interview with Ava, Christmas Island, 13 October 2009.

⁷⁹ Interview with Kelvin Lee, Christmas Island, 16 October 2009.

⁸⁰ Interview with Jasni, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

⁸¹ Hubbard, 'Inappropriate and incongruous', 15.

male UAMs, particularly given they had concerns that the UAMs were much older than they claimed. For example, Emily said:

Some of the last group [asylum seekers] said they were school age and you kind of go, I don't think you're school age and that sort of gets me a bit, you know. I don't think it's fair. It's not fair ... I think, as a parent, that's what I wanted to know [their ages].⁸²

Ella, who taught the UAMs at the local school, reflected on this issue and saw it very differently to many of the parents in the community.

They [parents] would ask how old are those boys, and I would say that they are around seventeen but they don't know the exact date because their parents are not educated. Their [UAMs] parents would have said 'well you were born when there was snow on the mountains' and given an approximation of a month or a year, and people [islanders] would say 'Well they don't look it, they look older.' But honestly, if you talk to them you know that they are boys. They speak, they giggle like boys, they act like boys. And I think if you just spoke to them and you heard about how worried they are for their family, for their parents, brothers and sisters, you would just have so much more understanding. There are some very closed minds in this community which surprises me considering it is so multicultural but there is an underbelly of ignorance on this island ... [Someone said to me] 'If I had a seventeen-year-old daughter I would not send her to school with those boys.' Now if I had a seventeen-year-old daughter I would trust her in a room with those boys more than I would in a room full of seventeen-year-old Australian boys, absolutely. They are so polite.⁸³

Not all islanders feared asylum seekers or saw them as criminals. Rather than making a distinction between themselves and asylum seekers, they spoke about their own historical marginalisation and past suffering. Both Huan and Choy Lan were extremely active during the UCIW's formative years. In their interviews they both spoke in depth about the union's struggle for justice, human rights and winning equality for Asian islanders. They also told of their parents' suffering as a result of racial discrimination. When reflecting on both Choy Lan and Huan's responses to asylum seekers, this Self/Other binary is not evident.

Choy Lan began her interview by talking about how Christmas Island was a safe place: 'There is crime [in Perth]. Here is almost crime free, you don't

⁸² Interview with Emily.

⁸³ Interview with Ella, Christmas Island, 16 February 2009.

have to worry about locking up your doors or your cars, young children can grow up free. There is no need to worry about things like being kidnapped.’⁸⁴ When asked about how islanders have responded to asylum seekers living in the community, she explained:

There are mixed feelings towards this. Some people will say things like they [asylum seekers] might be terrorists and things like that. But, personally, I think that if we accept them to the island and if they are given this freedom to come out into the community then we should accept them. I am quite passionate about people who had to flee from their country, risk their life coming here and behind it there must be very good reasons why they are here, not just to come here for the fun of it. So I am quite sympathetic to their causes, why they are here. But I can’t say for the rest of the people.⁸⁵

While the Q&A community bulletin revealed that some islanders were quite concerned about asylum seekers, Choy Lan held a contrasting view:

But nothing has happened, right? So why make a big issue out of it. I think it’s the attitude that determines how you treat them. To me they are desperate people who have fled their country, because of something terrible and so unhappy, to [have had to] come to another place to have freedom.⁸⁶

Choy Lan was not alone in her thinking about asylum seekers. When Huan was asked about asylum seekers living in the community he responded:

There are always people who get upset. The mainlanders who have been here a while, they get upset, but not islanders. They [mainlanders] don’t seem to understand that these people are running away from something, where for instance, our parents ran away from China or Malaysia, prisoner or starved to death, the war... you have to run for your life.⁸⁷

Married couple Luis and Maya first came to the island in 1977. Luis was from Singapore while Maya was from Penang. Both experienced racial discrimination during the apartheid years. Luis and Maya were also very active with the Catholic church, organising weekly Sunday masses at the local church. Luis and Maya also conducted mass at North West Point on Sundays. Regularly, with the permission of the Immigration Department,

⁸⁴ Interview with Choy Lan Seet, Christmas Island, 13 February 2009.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Interview with Huan, Perth, 30 June 2009.

they took eight asylum seekers from NWP to their home for dinner. A common complaint asylum seekers made was about the quality of the food served at the detention centre. Luis said:

I remember when I first came to the island all those years back and I used to go and eat in the canteen where the food was really cheap, rice and meat, but all the food tasted the same no matter what you had. I remember one night I was asked out to go to dinner at my friend's house ... The taste! It was a while before I could eat at the canteen again and even after 30 years, I still remember the taste. So hopefully when we bring them [asylum seekers] over here they feel the same also.⁸⁸

Luis and Maya were asked if they ever felt threatened by having asylum seekers on the island. They responded:

Maya: Not really, no, even though we know that there are a large number of them, we've never felt threatened by them. I mean, for us, there has been so many coming and going now. Some of them are out in the community now we have never felt threatened by them.

Luis: We are relying on them to do the right thing; if one thing goes wrong then ...

Maya: Especially because there is such large numbers of them coming in; that's when the problem could come.

Luis: So many are under great personal stress and they let them out here hopefully they are very cautious because one mistake could ruin it.⁸⁹

While Luis and Maya never felt threatened by the asylum seekers, they felt that the local community could easily turn against asylum seekers if a 'mistake' was made. Their prediction was correct. As will be shown in Chapter Ten, when the riots occurred at NWP in March 2011 islanders were furious at the detainees, and islander responses towards them shifted significantly.

The teachers on Christmas Island as a whole were sympathetic towards asylum seekers. Lilly, a school teacher, felt the school community was not only supportive at school but outside of school hours. This occurred because

⁸⁸ Interview with Luis, Christmas Island, 16 October 2009.

⁸⁹ Interview with Luis and Maya, 16 October 2009.

teachers were able to form relationships and get to know asylum seekers better because they had more opportunities to interact with them. Several teachers did extra activities with the UAMs on the weekend or visited them at their community detention houses. Not all islanders saw asylum seekers receiving free items as problematic. For example, Ella who taught the asylum seeker children at school pointed out:

There has just been more hostility this time, more negativity, and it's a whole range of reasons why. The fact that they lived in the community for about two months and they were seen to be given all this stuff and they were not guarded ... that's the only reason why I can think of. Maybe it's, as I said before, that the economy is down at the moment so you get this attitude of 'I work hard and they get things that are given to them for nothing', and it's like you sell all of your possessions and get on a leaky boat. You [some islanders] have no idea the risks that these kids have taken to get here and you are upset because they have a TV?⁹⁰

Sympathy for asylum seekers remained for those islanders who had advocated for asylum seekers in the past. However, there was a shift in how past advocates perceived detention policy under the Rudd Government, which offered an explanation as to why there was no advocacy movement on island as in previous years. For example, Beth said:

If mandatory detention is going to happen then I am going to be able to sleep a hell of a lot better at night with this style and form of mandatory compared to what it was ... Our role has changed a bit, before it was causing trouble, now it's kind of keeping the peace, building bridges ... I know the reason why we stopped. It's because we don't need to at the moment, not yet and hopefully we won't.⁹¹

The question arises as to why there were differing views about asylum seekers among islanders during this period, particularly when it came to the free movement of asylum seekers. This is resolved by considering Sibley's work on how space is exclusionary, including the domestic and private sphere: home. As hospitality focuses on the opening of one's home to the stranger, using the concept of home as a starting point is relevant.⁹² He explains that the

⁹⁰ Interview with Ella.

⁹¹ Interview with Beth, Christmas Island, 4 March 2009.

⁹² Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000): 45.

movement of social beings between the home and the locality contributes to the shaping of social space.⁹³ Tensions exist within the domestic space that are not fixed and come about from the 'ambiguity of boundaries which some people have difficulty in resolving'.⁹⁴ Sibley notes that these oppositions can be 'inside/outside, clean/dirty, tidy/untidy', which are essential features of the home. For example, 'Dirt "belongs" in the garden, but invades the house.'⁹⁵ It is this interruption and reinforcement of boundaries that 'the fear of pollution can be a constant source of anxiety and pollution is a consequence of the actions of others'.⁹⁶ For Sibley, he sees spatial purification as 'a key feature in the organization of social space.'⁹⁷ It is with the spaces of home or the locality that its inhabitants may wish to expel or purify the residues of what is thought not to belong: 'In such environments, difference will register as deviance, a source of threat to be kept out through the erection of strong boundaries, or expelled.'⁹⁸

As mentioned earlier, some islanders perceived that asylum seekers did not belong on Christmas Island and presented a threat; hence their negative and anxious responses. Sibley argues that socio-spatial exclusion is about social control – a term he defines as 'attempted regulation of the behaviour of individuals or groups by other individuals or groups in dominant positions'.⁹⁹ With the concept of home still in mind, Sibley explains how control and power manifests in the domestic space can be understood through the notions of 'positional and personalizing families'.¹⁰⁰ In positional families, power is invested in specific individuals such as the father authoritarian figure where control is managed through arbitrary rules and maintenance of spatial boundaries; for example, keeping children out of adult spaces. By way of contrast, personalising families are not as worried about exercising control and rules, and children will be involved in decision-making. How space is used and the activities that take place within it are negotiable and boundary

⁹³ David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London, Routledge, 1995), 90–1.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 94.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 96.

maintenance is not so important; hence less conflict over the location of activities and space is organised with a 'weak classification and framing'.¹⁰¹ To summarise: 'Control by exclusion is associated with the positional family; control through appeals to the collective interests of family members is characteristic of the personalizing family.'¹⁰²

The island community space can be interpreted as the islanders' 'home', and how its 'family' members respond to asylum seekers can be categorised into positional and personalised. From a positional perspective, the presence of asylum seekers in the community was non-negotiable, as a perception existed that they were polluting the island home. Asylum seekers belonged in the detention centre, where they were controlled. When this boundary was not maintained, islanders felt anxious. Some islanders can be defined as having a personalised response. The presence of asylum seekers in a shared community space was not problematic. In fact, it was welcomed, and I would argue this came about from having personal encounters with asylum seekers such as the teachers and Luis and Maya, or for those who perceived themselves as having a shared experience of marginalisation. Asylum seekers were seen as being part of the community who formed part of the island's collective identity given that they had been arriving on the island for over a decade.

Lack of resources and local resentment

Jacobsen's ideas about economic capacity and host community responses are relevant to this period of boat arrivals. She argues that factors such as land availability, employment patterns and infrastructure influence a host country's ability to absorb refugees. If a host country has a high economic capability, it potentially has the capacity to deal with the resource demands made by refugees.¹⁰³ Local people are less likely to be threatened when refugees bring resources such as labour and capital. Moreover, communities can benefit when assistance programs are implemented, where scarce resources and infrastructure are brought into the community.¹⁰⁴ However, she argues, 'Local resentment is often aroused when refugees are perceived to receive special

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ Karen Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses', 667.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

treatment.¹⁰⁵ This has also been noted by Every et al in their study into the Woodside (South Australia) community that hosted the Inverbrackie detention centre.¹⁰⁶ Goodall has also found community responses to asylum seekers in the British city of Stoke on Trent were negative when asylum seekers were allegedly receiving preferential treatment.¹⁰⁷ These findings parallel with Christmas Island where earlier it was noted that at the Immigration outreach community meeting, islanders perceived asylum seekers as receiving preferential treatment.

In Klocker's discussion on Port Augusta it was shown that some residents defined themselves as being disadvantaged, and then juxtaposed this with the presence of asylum seekers. This juxtaposition also occurred on Christmas Island. When islanders were interviewed about asylum seekers, they often spoke about how they were disadvantaged by the lack of resources and services available on Christmas Island along with the lack of consultation by the government. The unclear future direction of the island was also mentioned when talking about asylum seekers.

Both Hubbard and Klocker point out in their studies that asylum seekers were perceived as being a burden or non-productive. In opposition to this idea, some islanders saw the asylum seekers as benefiting the community and providing the island with a future. For example, Choy Lan said:

The point is that people have got to have employment here to keep the island going then I am happy because I'd like to stay here for as long as I wish. So for refugees; they're welcome. There is proper facilities here for them and it creates employment for the people.¹⁰⁸

The instability that the temporary closure of the mine created and the fact that Christmas Island is a remote place with very limited resources are important factors when considering how islanders responded to the first boat arrivals under the Rudd Government. As Jacobsen noted, if a host country has high economic capacity it will be better positioned to absorb refugees. Applying

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 668.

¹⁰⁶ Every et al., 'The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities: A South Australian case study', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48, no. 2 (2013): 173–196.

¹⁰⁷ Christine Goodall, 'The coming of the stranger: asylum seekers, trust and hospitality in a British city', *UNHCR Policy and Development and Evaluation Service*, 195, (2010): 1–48.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Choy Lan Seet.

this notion to the Christmas Island offers an explanation as to why local resentment towards asylum seekers existed on Christmas Island. Compounding local concerns over the island's economy was the perception that the government had made no concrete plans about the island's future. This was mentioned by James:

We're not sure if the government intends this to be a tourism island, a mining island, or a detention centre island. You can't have all three. You can't be all things to all people ... right now the economy is booming, and yet there is no investment. Everything is built on sand. It's a very, very fragile economy. The bank will not give you money to build a house or build a resort, because of what's happening here.¹⁰⁹

Food and accommodation

The lack of resources available to islanders became very obvious to me in the days that followed the first boat arrival under the Rudd Government. At that time locals seemed more preoccupied with the fact that *The Islander*, the supplies ship that comes to the island every few months, had docked in the Cove than the asylum seeker boat arrival. The supplies ship was late that month, and given that the island is not self-sufficient islanders had become anxious. As noted in my field notes:

After experiencing a shocking swell season last year, which resulted in no supply ship for five months and severe food shortages, islanders are continually anxious when they hear the ship is late. Islanders are far more emotional about the supply ship than boatpeople.¹¹⁰

In 2007, the year before boats began arriving under the Rudd Government, food shortages were common, as the supplies ship could not dock in the swell season. Everyone relied on highly expensive airfreighted goods while basic items such as milk became unavailable.

The Immigration Department pre-empted local concerns about resources in relation to asylum seekers. This was evident in the community bulletin it issued the day after the first boat arrival:

The government plans ahead to respond to unauthorised boat arrivals. We always have food and other necessities to supply us for a minimum of two months when a response team is sent to the island. All food

¹⁰⁹ Interview with James.

¹¹⁰ Dimasi, Field notes, Christmas Island, 4 October 2008.

supplies are arranged through local traders and the goods are ordered in addition to those suppliers' regular orders for the local community. Our current activities will have minimal impact on food supplies for island residents and our staff will be supporting the local economy by purchasing personal items from local businesses while they are here. DIAC has two dedicated health professionals for the care of people currently in detention, one of whom is based on CI.¹¹¹

When asylum seekers went into community detention, it became more apparent to islanders what the Immigration Department provided to them. Emily mentioned that rumours had circulated around the island in relation to the community detainees' shopping accounts: 'From what I've heard, I don't know what the truth is but they're spending more on groceries in a week than I could afford to spend so those types of things annoy me.'¹¹²

James raised the issue of what asylum seekers received in comparison to what islanders had access to:

There's a widening gap. For the locals, they see how DIAC, the public service delivers their responsibilities to the detention centre clients ... yet on the other hand, the people who are entrusted in looking after us are not. Well, they might be living their responsibilities, but they are nowhere near as good as what DIAC is doing. And the people in the community see this now and say, 'Hang on. I'm not anti-asylum seeker but hang on, I'm also not a mug. I'm an Australian citizen, I pay taxes.' I struggle to buy two tomatoes at the shop, yet the asylum seekers have a bag of twenty ... Now of course he's entitled to tomatoes, he's entitled to everything, he's a human being and needs to eat. I'm not anti-asylum seeker. But I get upset because I'd like some of that too, thank you. And I can't afford to pay two dollars a tomato.¹¹³

Abidin and Jasni spoke of the asylum seekers receiving too much:

Abidin: This is all a game, the government is playing a game ... If you take any asylum seeker that goes out to the mainland ... They don't get cars to drive or to buy things ... out in Sydney do they all get that? I am asking whether the asylum seekers [on the mainland] get new watches or whatever they are wearing.

Jasni: The government, they're spoiling them.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 3 October 2008.

¹¹² Interview with Emily

¹¹³ Interview with James.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Abidin, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

Negative perceptions about asylum seekers were linked to issues around an increase in the rental market and accommodation shortages. During 2009, speculation existed on Christmas Island that Immigration was offering landlords higher rental rates in order to secure accommodation. A DIAC community update mentioned the issue of accommodation shortages:

The department would like to respond to rumours about how its work on CI is affecting the cost of rental accommodation. Concerns have been voiced that DIAC offered to pay rents to property owners at an inflated price, thus causing landlords to evict tenants paying a lower level of rent. These rumours are false. DIAC has not approached any property owners to discuss rental opportunities in this way. It is not the department's policy to ask owners to evict their tenants, even if a lease is due to expire.¹¹⁵

Braydon Moloney, an islander who could not obtain accommodation, wrote to the Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor about this issue.¹¹⁶ Another islander, Andrew Gooley and his family experienced the rental shortage after their landlord sold the property in which they resided. The only available flat was one for \$550 a week, more than double what he currently paid. Andrew told the *Australian*:

I am fully in support of the fair and swift processing of asylum seekers ... These people have done it hard and deserve a fair go, it's the Australian way. But as an Australian citizen, I have rights too. Why is it that I cannot find a house for my family, but an illegal immigrant gets housed, fed, clothes and paid?¹¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, perceptions existed among some islanders that asylum seekers received preferential treatment over islanders or that asylum seekers simply received too much. For example, some islanders thought that asylum seekers received bottled water while in detention, and emailed the Immigration Department about this issue. In a community update, DIAC responded:

Detainees do in fact drink local water ... However; we provide bottled water when new arrivals arrive at Flying Fish Cove and during initial screening procedures. These people are hot, often dehydrated from an extended period at sea and sometimes nauseous. This initial processing

¹¹⁵ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 5 August 2009.

¹¹⁶ Nick Butterly, 'Rent crisis hits Christmas Island', *West Australian*, 3 March 2010, 13.

¹¹⁷ Paige Taylor, 'Locals lash out over "full island"', *Australian*, 3 March 2010, 2.

takes place at the wharf and Construction Camp – both sites have limited options for providing tap water.¹¹⁸

Another concern that islanders had was over asylum seekers wearing ‘designer’ surf clothing brands. Jasni said:

I was really outraged when I heard that they were in this brand shirt and whatever. I was confused but then I see it. So in that way, you can give them those kinds of things but you should give to Australia, no matter who the Australian are.¹¹⁹

If detainees personally bought what was perceived to be luxury items, islanders raised questions about refugees’ credibility, as perception existed that ‘genuine’ refugees are poor. Ava picked up on this sentiment:

The idea is that if the asylum seekers can afford Billabong¹²⁰ then obviously we are giving them too much money. ‘We can’t afford a Billabong t-shirt!’ And people don’t realise that a lot of this stuff was donated. The Red Cross donated mobile phones. They didn’t come out here with mobile phones, and those phones did not come out of the people of Australia’s money. They came from the Red Cross. It’s crazy, the sentiment of those people is; we want asylum seekers to come here with no shoes, raggy clothes, dirty hair and ill; that is their idea of a refugee, then will they accept them as a genuine refugee. But if they come here and look clean, educated, from a decent family and some of them have money, then they are excluded for that reason.¹²¹

While it was explained to the community that detainees’ purchases were controlled, this did not stop islanders from claiming that asylum seekers still received ‘luxury’ items. For example, Elijah said:

You’re not teaching them anything by throwing iPods at them and giving them stuff so that when they go to the mainland to be in the real world, they’re not able to learn anything because they’re babied and loved, you know? They just need to be respected, that’s all. Treat them properly, show them Australian’s have got a conscience about certain things. But don’t give them any false hope that it’s a free world out there, because when they get to the mainland, they get looked after for a little while after they get there, and then you’re on your own.¹²²

¹¹⁸ DIAC, ‘Community Update’, Christmas Island, 21 July 2009.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Jasni, Christmas Island, 5 March 2009.

¹²⁰ Billabong is a surf clothing brand label.

¹²¹ Interview with Ava.

¹²² Interview with Elijah, Christmas Island, 28 November 2009.

Abidin perceived the asylum seekers as receiving preferential treatment over the islanders:

We want equal! We want equal opportunity for everybody regardless of who you are what race. What you give to the asylum seekers is what you should be giving to us. I don't know how we will go about taking up the issues with the supermarket [increased food prices]. What I am saying is that if you bring in something on the Thursday evening flight for DIAC or whatever food then make sure that food goes to the community, it doesn't have to be tonnes and tonnes of it even by kilos, 100 kilos should be enough. If you want to get fresh apples for the Iraqi kids at school, make sure you give it to all the kids. If you can't do that then you might as well not give anything.¹²³

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the period of boat arrivals from 2008 to 2010 and highlighted the significant shift in islander responses to asylum seekers in comparison to previous periods. In earlier periods, the local perception was that asylum seekers were in need of their help. From 2008, this was no longer the case, with residents perceiving that the burgeoning detention industry provided asylum seekers with all their needs. In fact, some islanders perceived that asylum seekers' needs were being better met than their own, which consequently created negative responses that were not evident in earlier periods. With the significant move towards Christmas Island becoming a border economy, islander responses was less about welcoming asylum seekers but rather what benefits asylum seekers would bring to the island.

With the free movement of asylum seekers in shared community spaces, fears and anxieties manifested. The physical closeness to asylum seekers meant that there were no boundaries to separate who belonged and who did not on the island space. Community discontent is best described as a positional response where boundary maintenance is vital to purify the island space. Rather than islanders having a shared experience with asylum seekers, local protests emerged in opposition to the asylum seeker presence.

¹²³ Interview with Abidin.

In Chapter Ten, shared experiences and protest also feature when two critical events are explored: the boat tragedy and the riots, and the subsequent production of polarised islander responses.

CHAPTER TEN

Boat Crash and Riots: 2010–2011

This chapter discusses two critical events in Christmas Island's history that were in close succession and produced polarised responses. Local reactions to these events provide further insight into how hospitality functions on Christmas Island. The first is the Christmas Island boat tragedy, or what later became known as the SIEV 221 boat crash, that occurred on 15 December 2010. During this tragedy, 50 asylum seekers drowned as their boat, the *Janga*, was smashed apart on the razor-sharp rocks. Islanders bore witness to the event and rescued some asylum seekers. The second event is the Christmas Island riots that took place in March 2011. As a result of lengthy delays in processing, North West Point (NWP) detainees protested, escaped and rioted. I was present on Christmas Island for both events.

Islander responses to the boat tragedy were dominated by compassion and support, while the riots centred on discourses around fear and safety. Bauman's words are apt in this context: 'The human attitude is an intricate mixture of interest and fear, reverence and abhorrence, impulsion and repulsion.'¹ While I had concluded interviewing islanders when these events occurred, I have included this chapter given that it reveals that islander responses to asylum seekers fluctuate between hospitality and hostility.

The first section of the chapter discusses how islanders witnessed the boat crash and their responses that followed. I first recount the event of the boat crash and the aftermath. Following on from this, local acts of hospitality and islander care for asylum seekers are discussed. In 2011, the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Boat Crash (JSC) formally investigated the boat crash. Key sources consulted include transcripts from the JSC hearings, submissions and the JSC final report are consulted. Media reports, the *Islander*, Immigration Department community updates and observations made at the memorial service are drawn upon.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Semiotics and the function of culture', in *Essays in Semiotics/Essais de Sémiotique*, eds Julia Kristeva, Josette Rey-Debove and Donna Umiker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 290.

The second section explores Christmas Islander responses to asylum seekers during the riots when a marked shift occurred from hospitality to hostility. Material sourced for this section includes community bulletins published by the island administrator's office and the Immigration Department, articles in the *Islander* and media reports. Ethnographic observations from my attendance community meetings convened by the Immigration Department and conversations with islanders are also drawn upon.

The Christmas Island boat crash

In December 2010, the swell season hit Christmas Island. As the waves pounded the cliff face, houses in the Settlement shook from the impact and salt sprayed windows and roofs. It had rained for days and the monsoonal weather showed no sign of easing. In the early hours, the *Janga* arrived at Rocky Point, near the Settlement. On board were 92 mainly Iranian and Iraqi men, women and children. By sunrise, the *Janga* was in great distress after its engine failed, facing 5 metre waves. Smoke poured from the boat's exhaust system and the smell of diesel was thick in the air. Local resident Ray Murray, who lived close to Rocky Point, was the first to sight the boat in distress and called the triple zero emergency number. Locals residing in the Settlement congregated at the cliff's edge after the smell of smoke wafted through the misty morning air. Soon they heard the screams of the *Janga*'s passengers. Islanders responded by gathering life jackets from boat owners and dive operators who lived close by. Locals then scrambled down the cliff face, some gashing their legs on the sharp rocks while forming a human chain to throw life jackets and ropes. A huge wave hurled the *Janga* onto the sharp rocky cliff face and smashed it to pieces. Surviving asylum seekers were in the water for around one hour until the Australian naval vessel HMAS *Pirie* arrived from the other side of the island.

Before long, floating bodies among the flotsam and jetsam surfaced, some pulled far out to sea by the strong current. At approximately 9.30 am, Indian Ocean Territories Health Services (IOTHS) set up a triage area at Ethel beach, where the Christmas Island State Emergency Service (SES); Serco; St John Ambulance Voluntary Marine Rescue (VMR), Fire and Emergency Services

Authority (FESA) and Customs assisted with the emergency. By 10 am survivors were brought ashore by rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIB). At approximately 11 am, the bodies that had been found were transferred by RHIB to Ethel Beach.²

Those rescued were 27 Iranians, seven Iraqis, five stateless people, and three Indonesian crew. They included three now orphaned children. The survivors were taken to Phosphate Hill detention centre and detained in a compound called Charlie. Meanwhile, as the local morgue did not have sufficient capacity, 30 bodies were stored in refrigerated shipping containers located along the local hospital's driveway.

For two days after the boat crash, an air search was conducted by two Defence P-3C aircraft and an Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) Dornier search and rescue aircraft. Christmas Island residents volunteered their time walking the shoreline, surveying the sea for victims. Local divers assisted in the search for recovering bodies. On 17 December at 6.20 pm, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) suspended the search.³ A DIAC community update explained: 'Advice from a medical expert on survivability is that a person from the vessel could not have survived more than 48 hours in the sea, even with assistance from lifejackets or floating debris.'⁴

Within days of the tragedy, journalists arrived on the island and interviewed islanders who had witnessed the boat crash. Islander accounts appeared in national newspapers and on television. Many islanders received random phone calls from the journalists, who had trawled the phone book for residents listed on Christmas Island. Islanders recounted harrowing first-hand accounts of witnessing the boat crash. Local dive operator Simon Prince told an ABC journalist, '[There were] dead children, live children – I have a very disturbing image in my head of a small child with a life jacket on down in the water, just floating among the wreckage ... That one's going to haunt me for a

² DIAC, 'Submission to the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy', no. 9, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, 2011, 11.

³ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 18 December 2010.

⁴ *ibid.*

while.’⁵ Local Glenn Gibbs, who spoke to the *Australian* about trying to save a young girl by jumping in the sea but was stopped by other islanders, said, ‘I don’t think she made it.’⁶ Christmas Island councillor Kamar Ismail reported, ‘I saw a person dying in front of me and there was nothing we could do to save them ... Babies, children maybe three or four years old, they were hanging on to bits of timber, they were screaming, “Help, help, help.”’⁷

In the weeks that followed the incident, the boat crash dominated island life. The AFP asked anyone who had witnessed the boat crash or had video or photographic footage to contact local police. Residents were informed that counselling opportunities were available as advertised on the Settlement roundabout blackboard. A leaflet, ‘Helping yourself after a traumatic event’ was left in public places such as shops and distributed in postal boxes. Some islanders no longer wanted to swim in the ocean for fear of encountering bodies or debris from the boat. The local community was warned that debris from the boat was classified as ‘quarantine risk material’, as it may contain pests such as termites.⁸

Local heroes

Public spaces told stories of sorrow for survivors and praise for those who assisted in heroic rescue response. A notice on the local community blackboard said: ‘Thank you. You’re all champs: HMAS Pirie, Triton, AFP, SES, IOTHS, FESA, Settlement and Kampong early risers, Shire, VMR, CI Dive Operators and to all the volunteers that day. You are all amazing and precious to us all. Thank you.’⁹ The front page of the *Islander* told of the community’s sympathy for the survivors. Shire President Gordon Thomson wrote:

On behalf of the people of Christmas Island and the Council of the
Shire of Christmas Island expresses our deepest condolences to the

⁵ Sarah Colleton, ‘Witness tells of “haunting” asylum boat tragedy’, *ABC News*, 15 December 2010.

⁶ Nicolas Perpetch, Debbie Guest and Tony Barrass, ‘Screams heard above the storm’, *Australian*, 16 December 2010, 1.

⁷ Kirsty Needham and Andrew Stephenson, ‘There was nothing we could do to save them’, *Age*, accessed 26 June 2014, www.theage.com.au/national/there-was-nothing-we-could-do-to-save-them-20101215-18y79.html.

⁸ ‘Attention all residents: Quarantine risk material’, *Islander*, 24 December 2010, 19.

⁹ Photo of the community blackboard was published in *Islander*, 24 December 2010, 1.

family and friends of the asylum seekers who were lost in the wrecking of their boat on the cliffs of Christmas Island. The President and Deputy President of the Shire attended a private ceremony with the survivors and their families on Sunday 19 December. We expressed our condolences on behalf of the community. We were deeply moved by our meetings with the survivors who are enduring great suffering.¹⁰

Brian Lacey, the island administrator wrote of the courageous actions of the local community:

The Christmas Island community witnessed one of the worst tragedies in its recent history. While acknowledging the very sad loss of life and the plight of the survivors I wish to convey to those members of the community who were involved in the search and rescue and the recovery process my deep sense of pride in your selfless dedicated efforts. Without your efforts the outcome would have been even more tragic than we could imagine ... Presently our whole community deserves commendation for its response.¹¹

Chris Su, the DIAC community liaison officer and witnessed the boat crash. He subsequently wrote an article called 'People' for the local newspaper in which he invoked notions of absolute hospitality and help for the nameless stranger are present in his article:

On that day, I saw people helping other people. There were no distinctions between navy people, island people or boat people that day. People saw other people who needed help and regardless of whether or not it was their job to come to the rescue, dozens did ... What was so extraordinary that day is that strangers were prepared to go to such extraordinary lengths to help people whom they had never met. I heard of men being held back from diving off the cliff into monstrous swell who felt the need to help the helpless ... For a short time, a stranger became a loved one.¹²

The Immigration Department thanked the people of Christmas Island in a community update: 'The Department of Immigration and Citizenship wishes to thank the Christmas Island community for their response to, and ongoing understanding towards the people rescued from the vessel known as SIEV 221.'¹³

¹⁰ Gordon Thomson, 'The December 15 tragedy', *Islander*, 24 December 2010, 1.

¹¹ Brian Lacy, 'Administrator's message to the community', *Islander*, 24 December 2010, 1.

¹² Chris Su, 'People', *Islander*, 24 December 2010, 22.

¹³ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 14 January 2011.

After witnessing the suffering of asylum seekers at sea, acts of hospitality by the islanders took place. Locals pooled together toys for surviving children. Two local women established a survivor trust fund for islanders to donate profits made from selling photographs and video footage of the crash to the media. Local residents expressed the wish to meet with survivors and offer support but did not know how to navigate the rules of visiting people in detention. These residents included those who volunteered with emergency services. For example, a St John Ambulance paramedic who assisted in the rescue explained to me how she wished for more information about the survivors' recovery. But, she was unsure how she could make contact with these survivors.

As in the aftermath of the Tampa affair, detention created distance between islanders and survivors. Making contacting with survivors was challenging, as no opportunities were provided by the Immigration Department for islanders to make contact. Su referred to this at the subsequent JSC hearing held on Christmas Island:

To see somebody in detention, you need to know their name and identification number. Without those two items, you cannot really request to see anybody. Even if there was an attempt to meet, I do not think it would have been approved by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship because this was a very sensitive time for those survivors.¹⁴

A similar sentiment was expressed by Thomson at the JSC hearing:

The structure of detention is exactly that – people are locked away, and there are formal processes to go through to meet with people who are locked away. So that is an immediate barrier to contact. It is not as if there are social events organised frequently for people to have casual encounters ... For an individual who is somewhat traumatised by their own experience, I would think that working out how to deal with the formal process of contacting someone would provide enough of a barrier.¹⁵

While the Immigration Department did not organise for islanders to visit the survivors, it did provide regular community updates about the survivors.

¹⁴ Chris Su, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, Official Committee Hansard, 7 June 2011, 31.

¹⁵ Gordon Thomson, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, Official Committee Hansard, 7 June 2011, 13.

These updates were published from the time of the boat crash until mid-March 2011, when the survivors left the island. For example, several weeks after the tragedy, the Immigration Department wrote:

The 42 people rescued received immediate health care. They now continue to receive ongoing health and support services on Christmas Island, and in some instances, on the mainland following hospitalisation and treatment there. Many have been reunited with friends and relatives already in detention. For the children who have suffered loss, it is a relief they have some extended family members, currently in the department's care, who can provide additional support ... With the assistance of the Australian Federal Police and other agencies, the department continues to work with the survivors in relation to those who are still missing and did not survive the tragedy. Everyone involved is doing as much as they can to help people deal with these tragic events. The incident has deeply touched those people working with the survivors as they continue to work with, treat and care for them.¹⁶

The memorial service

At 9.45 on 5 March 2011, a public memorial service took place at the recreation centre, which I attended. At least 100 guests came to the ceremony including Warren Snowdon, member of parliament for Lingiari district and Trish Crossin, senator for the Northern Territory. During the service, two Iranian Immigration Department interpreters performed Persian music to 'thank the rescuers'.¹⁷ The stage was adorned with hundreds of white lilies and origami paper flowers. Su explained that the hundreds of origami flowers were made by a young local Chinese woman for guests to keep or place at the crash site, which led Senator Crossin to later tell the JSC that this was 'astounding proof of evidence of the contribution that people in this community have made'.¹⁸

During the memorial service, speeches were made by the senators, Immigration staff, medical staff and religious leaders. Zainal Majid, President of the Christmas Island Islamic Council and SES volunteer broke down in tears as he spoke of bearing witness to the tragedy:

¹⁶ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 14 January 2011.

¹⁷ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Memorial service for the December 15th Tragedy', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 1.

¹⁸ Trish Crossin, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, Official Committee Hansard, 7 June 2011, 33.

Fifteenth of December is a day that we will never forget easily for the island and the island people and especially the volunteers. I cannot stop seeing the eyes, the faces, of the people on the boat as it was dashed against the rock, the father desperately clinging to the boat with one hand and with the other clutching his child to his side. Then a child swept from the arms of the mother. It was horrible. We are sorry for the families who have lost their loved ones in their attempt to find a better place to be.¹⁹

Iman Abdul Gaffar Ismail told the audience:

There is something we share amongst us, not just as Muslims, but as a Community, as Islanders on Christmas Island, we have something, a unique thing that we can't find in other places that we visit, we are an island that we know that has 'hands helping hands'.²⁰

Brian Lacey, the island administrator said:

Our community can be proud of their efforts ... You have all shown courage, leadership and the spirit of resilience that can only be shown in remote locations like Christmas Island. Christmas Island is place [sic] where displaced persons; people made homeless by terrifying and horrific acts of inhumanity, can find safety and care. We are in that unique part of the world that can provide safe harbour to people who, driven from their homeland, want to be Australian. We are able to care for asylum seekers and refugees and we do our best to do just that.²¹

Notions of cosmopolitanism and hospitality characterise the memorial speeches. Szerszynski and Urry explain that cosmopolitanism involves 'a willingness to take risks by virtue of encountering the "other" ' and 'an openness to other peoples cultures and a willingness/ability to appreciate some elements of the language/culture of the "other" '.²² For example, Lacey and Gaffar spoke of hospitable islander responses that centre on welcome and refuge regardless of who the asylum seekers were. Furthermore, Nurmi, Räsänen and Oksanen note: 'Disasters temporarily break down distinctions

¹⁹ Zainal Majid, 'SIEV 221 memorial speech', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 9.

²⁰ Abdul Gaffar Ismail, 'SIEV 221 memorial speech', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 8.

²¹ Brian Lacy, 'SIEV 221 memorial speech', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 6.

²² Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry, 'Cultures of cosmopolitanism', *Sociological Review* 50, no. 4 (2002): 470.

and culturally derived discriminations' because during this period, 'the whole community is affected.'²³

Cosmopolitanism was not confined to the speeches, but extended to the memorial plaque that was unveiled at the ceremony. The inscription on plaque reads: 'We reflect on this day with sadness. The loss of each person's life diminishes our own because we are part of humankind.'

Disconnecting survivors and islanders

In the lead-up to and on the actual day of the memorial service, many islanders anticipated that the survivors would attend. However, this did not occur. Su, who organised the memorial service, told the JSC that one of the reasons he chose the recreation centre as a venue was that 'they [asylum seekers] are living next door at Phosphate Hill and so it would be easy for Serco to arrange for the numbers of people to just walk over here to join the memorial service'.²⁴ Thomson explained that the planning of the memorial service 'was based on the involvement of the survivors'.²⁵ He said that the Shire of Christmas Island had sought advice from a professional in the field about how the memorial service should be conducted. It was decided that the place of the crash site was not appropriate if the survivors attended, so the recreation centre was chosen.²⁶

Thomson noted in the Shire of Christmas Island's submission to the committee that in the lead-up to the memorial, the shire and DIAC discussed survivors attending:

I and many of our community including particularly some of the volunteer rescuers were keen for survivors to attend. Over several days DIAC's advice changed from survivors would be transferred off the Island before the event, then they would be here and DIAC would facilitate attendance. Finally in the couple of days before the memorial Fiona Andrew [DIAC Regional Manager] advised that she was

²³ Johanna Nurmi, Pekka Räsänen, and Atte Oksanen, 'The norm of solidarity: Experiencing negative aspects of community life after a school shooting tragedy.' *Journal of Social Work* 12, no. 3 (2011): 303.

²⁴ Su, Joint Select Committee, 31.

²⁵ Thomson, Joint Select Committee, 13.

²⁶ *ibid.*

advised the best interest of the survivors would not be served by their attendance and that this was advice from her medical team.²⁷

Su told the JSC about the local community's desire for survivors to attend the memorial service:

The conversation we had with DIAC was that we wanted to have the asylum seeker come to the memorial service as well because it was not honourable to have a memorial service and not invite the people who lost people that day. DIAC were very indecisive about whether or not I could have asylum seekers come: they said they [asylum seekers] were not going to be there, then they were going to be there. Then DIAC said they had received advice from the counsellors regarding whether or not they should all be grieving at the same place.²⁸

Noel Clement, head of the Australian Services, Red Cross, told the JSC that the survivors and the islanders should have come together at the memorial service, as there was a strong need for them to reunite. He made clear to the JSC that the memorial service provided an opportunity for people to recover from the tragedy and 'talk about their shared experience and provide some symbolism of what they had been through':

On island, we found that there was an expectation, rightly or wrongly, from some of the people who had been involved as volunteer responders that they would get an opportunity to reunite with some of the survivors at the memorial service. They saw that as fairly important to them just in terms of some human connection. They felt that there was a strong emotional value for them and being able to make that connection. Unfortunately, that did not happen ... There did seem to be a disconnect between the expectations of some of the people attending the memorial that there would be an opportunity ... It is something that should have been facilitated. It needed to be organised, rather than leaving individuals to try to do it themselves.²⁹

Clement explained that the Red Cross had discussions with survivors and believed that some were happy to meet with the islanders who assisted in the rescue and indicated a desire to do so. He also noted that the 'physical and

²⁷ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Submission', 3.

²⁸ Su, Joint Select Committee, 31.

²⁹ Noel Clements, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, Official Committee Hansard, 27 May 2011, 2.

emotional state of a lot of the survivors had changed', so there was now capacity for them to meet with the local community.³⁰

Su explained that in late February 2011 the Immigration Department held a meeting with himself and Gordon Thomson. The Immigration Department said that the survivors would not be on the island by the time of the memorial service. In response, Su and Thomson requested that they have a meeting with the survivors. On 23 February 2011, 10 days before the memorial service, a meeting was held at the detention centre with Hadi and Ramin, two survivors who Thomson said 'wished to record their appreciation of the support they had received from Christmas Island people and DIAC.'³¹ Thomson and Su collected thank you letters from survivors during their meeting at the detention centre. Su also gave Ramin and Hadi an invitation to the memorial service he had translated to Farsi, so that the survivors knew 'we were showing solidarity with them and were thinking about them throughout this time'.³² Ramin and Hadi responded that they would not be on island on the day of the memorial service but thanked the community for thinking of them 'over the last few months'.³³

The survivors were in fact still on the island on morning of the service and were not flown out until later that day. John Moorhouse, Deputy Secretary of the Immigration Department said that none of the survivors made requests to attend the memorial service.³⁴ When the chair of the JSC asked Moorhouse whether there was any dialogue with the survivors about attending, he responded no.³⁵ While the service took place, the Immigration Department escorted the survivors and detainees who lost relatives to Rocky Point to view the boat tragedy site as 'mental health advice had been sent that facilitating a visit to the wreck site could assist survivors to resolve their grief and help to reduce future psychological morbidity'.³⁶

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Shire of Christmas Island, 'Submission', 3.

³² Su, Joint Select Committee, 31.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ John Moorhouse, Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy, Official Committee Hansard, 27 May 2011, 32.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ DIAC, 'Submission', 7.

Su told the JSC that one of the reasons the Immigration Department did not want the survivors at the memorial was because it may have attracted media:

I think there was always the feeling from the department that the media should not come to the island on the day to cover the memorial service. It was the DIAC policy that the media are not allowed to film asylum seekers and show their faces on TV, and so on and so forth. I think that was also one of the reasons why they decided not to let the asylum seekers come to the memorial service. I think that is it.³⁷

When the JSC asked Moorhouse why he thought the islanders wanted the survivors at the memorial service, he replied that the islanders wanted to be 'inclusive' and that the service was a community event and that the asylum seekers 'are part of the broader Christmas Island community'.³⁸ Despite the Immigration Department not inviting the survivors to the memorial and keeping them separate from the Christmas Island community, a number of acts occurred to establish what Clements referred to as a 'human connection'.

Reconnecting survivors and the islanders

Islanders' responses to survivors were dominated by a shared experience, which prompted, as Clements noted, a need for survivors and islanders to 'talk about their shared experience'. Several actions were initiated by islanders to overcome the non-attendance of survivors at the memorial service, demonstrating a desire for connection and reconnection. Su explains that when organising the layout of the memorial service at the recreation centre he took into consideration the non-presence of the asylum seekers and sought ways to rectify this:

I moved it [the stage] to the far end of the court because when you roll up the roller doors you look right into Phosphate Hill camp, you are not even 10 metres away, so if the clients really wanted to come and they were there but were not being allowed to come out, they could still come to the fence and have a look in – we were that close to them.³⁹

³⁷ Su, Joint Select Committee, 32.

³⁸ Moorhouse, Joint Select Committee, 32.

³⁹ Su, Joint Select Committee, 31.

The public reading of survivor thank you letters addressed to the Christmas Island community provided a link between survivors and islanders. These were read out by Gordon Thomson. One statement said:

When the sun rose, angels were sent to an island in Australia called Christmas Island to rescue innocent people who were caught in the infinite ocean. They risked their lives to save the survivors of the broken boat. Residents of the island who witnessed the incident tried to save us throwing life jackets and ropes. And so did the Navy and Police. Words are not enough to express our gratitude. We do not know how to thank them.⁴⁰

Ramin, who lost his wife, son, brother and sister-in-law prepared the following statement:

Here on Christmas Island we have met the kindest people on earth. From my heart I appreciate all your help ... I wish I could talk your language ... how it is here, how kind you are ... We lost wife, kids, a lot of people. The huge hole in my heart from that loss has been filled with the kindness of the great people here.⁴¹

Haidi who lost his brother and sister-in-law thanked the local community:

Everyone who is alive, they know they are owing Christmas Island people for their lives, for their life jackets, their life. None of us survived if the people on the cliff had not given us the lifejackets. Some people heard that we were helped, but I saw it with my eyes. From their heart, they helped us ... We say special thanks for the memorial. Thank you for remembering those we lost and putting your heart next to ours, the sad moments we went through, what a great honour.⁴²

A procession to Tampa View of those attending the service took place and at the crash site flowers were thrown into the ocean. At the same time, with permission from the Immigration Department, Gordon Thomson and I took the white lilies from the memorial service into the survivor's compound at the detention centre. To assist in overcoming the lamenting of survivor absence at the service, the sharing of flowers was an attempt to bring the memorial to the survivors and reconnect islanders and survivors. We handed the lilies to the survivors and told them that the flowers were from the people of Christmas Island. The survivors responded positively in appreciation of the gesture.

⁴⁰ SIEV 221 survivor, 'SIEV 221 memorial letter', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 3.

⁴¹ Ramin, 'SIEV 221 memorial letter', *Islander*, 11 March 2011, 7.

⁴² *ibid*, 8.

Islanders' yearning to be reunited with survivors was partially fulfilled one year after the boat tragedy. In 2011, a memorial service initiated by the shire council was held. With money raised from the survivor trust, three survivors were flown to the island for the ceremony. The 2011 memorial service was held at Tai Jin House, where the SIEV X memorial is located. At the memorial service, the plaque that was first unveiled at the March 2011 service now emerged as a permanent memorial site, including the emplacement of the propeller from the SIEV 221 that was retrieved from the ocean earlier that year. When the service concluded and the attendees went outside to view the memorial site, the survivors came forward and shook the hands of the Christmas Islanders and hugged them. After the service, the survivors and the islanders went to the site of the crash and threw flowers into the water, cried and prayed together.

Hospitality and hostility: A paradox?

The fickle and conditional nature of hospitality could be observed in a contrasting response to the riots that soon took place after the boat crash. Within the philosophy of hospitality, a paradox exists that is exemplified on Christmas Island. This was explored in Chapter Four, where the contradictory nature of hospitality was discussed. As noted previously, Derrida points out that the foreigner (*hostis*) can be either 'welcomed as guest or as enemy.'⁴³ He goes on to explain:

One can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect or claim one's hospitality, the own home that makes possible one's own hospitality ... Anyone who encroaches on my 'at home' on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage.⁴⁴

Rozakou posits that hospitality 'sets the boundaries between outsiders and insiders, and it is a practice of sovereignty of control over the stranger. It is a

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000): 45.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 53–5.

one-way offer and also a means of dealing with alterity.’⁴⁵ Speaking of the stranger, Ahmed states:

Are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place. Such as recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of ‘this place’, as where ‘we’ dwell.⁴⁶

When this boundary ceases to exist between the host and guest, is the point where the guest becomes the ‘hostile subject’ that Derrida describes.

During and after the boat crash, asylum seekers were welcomed on Christmas Island. Islander experiences of bearing witness to the suffering of survivors during the crash, allowed for sympathy and support as well as the formation of a ‘shared experience’. However, when the riots occurred several months later, hospitality on Christmas Island dissipated and was replaced with hostility.

Christmas Island riots

On 17 March 2011, a large cloud of black smoke rose above North West Point detention centre. Residents in the Settlement could see the cloud in the night sky while the smell of smoke lingered in the air. Detainees had rioted for some hours that evening, setting on fire seven accommodation marquees and two administration blocks. Serco staffs were evacuated and Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers stormed the centre, firing off beanbag bullets and spraying tear gas to quell the 250 rioters who threw rocks at them. During the riot, 300 men not involved in the riot and fearing for their own safety were evacuated to the recreation centre.⁴⁷ Several islanders came to the lookout Jack’s Point to film the riots and sell the footage to the media. Journalists also stationed themselves at the lookout to report the story. By the next

⁴⁵ Katerina Rozakou, ‘The biopolitics of hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the management of refugees’, *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3 (2012): 565.

⁴⁶ Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22.

⁴⁷ ABC, ‘Extra police sent to quell Christmas Island riots’, 18 March 2011, accessed 16 July 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-18/extra-police-sent-to-quell-christmas-island-riots/2652240>.

morning stories about fires, tear gas and an emergency response hit the headlines.

The Immigration Minister said the violence was completely unacceptable and that 'around 200 protesters seem to think that violent behaviour is an acceptable way to influence the outcome of their visa application or influence government decision making'.⁴⁸ However, tensions at NWP had been mounting for some time. Only weeks before, when I was visiting NWP detainees, the environment was tense, with two detainees telling me they were all becoming crazy and the centre was severely overcrowded. In a leaked document obtained by the *Australian* after the riots, it was revealed that former Christmas Island NWP detention centre manager, Ray Wiley, communicated his concerns to his superiors five months earlier. The document explained that there was 'chronic overcrowding at Christmas Island's main detention centre, including 144 detainees housed in classrooms, 92 in storerooms, 30 in a visiting area and 240 in tents', and that they centre was short fifteen staff per day.'⁴⁹

Several days before the protests began, around 200 asylum seekers escaped from the detention centre. The first escape began on Friday 11 March, late in the evening. Fences in Lilac and Aqua compounds were knocked down and approximately 150 mainly Iranian and Iraqi men walked into the town centre. By morning, asylum seekers wandered around Poon Saan and Drumsite, some chanting 'freedom, freedom' as they walked, while others held signs stating 'freedom'. Asylum seekers protested over the time it was taking to process their asylum claims. Journalist David Marr points out that many detainees had waited over eight or nine months for their first interviews.⁵⁰ Other frustrated detainees had been refused their refugee status assessment and had not been given an opportunity to appeal these decisions.

On the first day of the escape, the island administrator issued a community bulletin, which explained that asylum seekers were peacefully protesting:

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Paige Taylor, 'Christmas Island asylum centre at risk: Former manager', *Australian*, 22 March 2011.

⁵⁰ David Marr, 'Violence on island of broken promises', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2011, accessed 22 November 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/violence-on-island-of-broken-promises-20110325-1ca13.html>.

The community needs to be aware that there are a group of asylum seekers within the community staging a passive protest. The group are protesting about the length of time taken to process their claims for refugee status. There is no need for the community to be alarmed as the members of the group are calm and showing no signs of aggression and do not intend to harm. The stated intention of the group is to stage a sit-in at the airport.⁵¹

The AFP blocked off the roads surrounding the airport, and those checking in for flights were diverted to the recreation centre. In the community bulletin, locals were asked not to 'go to the airport ... as their presence may hamper the police operations'.⁵² Some protesters left the airport and wandered around the island. The police followed the escapees, attempting to persuade them to return to NWP. By late Saturday afternoon, around 50 men had returned to the centre. However, by that night asylum seekers escaped again. Extra police and Serco officers were flown to the island to deal with them. By Sunday night the situation at the detention centre deteriorated and over the next five nights protests and riots took place.

On 18 March, the day after the last night of riots, 70 extra police were flown to the island, 'bringing the total police strength to 188'.⁵³ Serco handed control over to the AFP to restore calm in the centre. Meanwhile, the Immigration Department began transferring detainees from the island to mainland detention centres to ease overcrowding at the centre.

Local community responses

During the protests, community bulletins were issued daily by the island administrator. A community meeting was held on Thursday 17 March 2011, six days after the first escape. Over 200 people attended the meeting held at the recreation centre's basketball courts. I was present at the meeting and observed a tense atmosphere and islanders geared up to vent. At the front sat representatives from DIAC, AFP, Serco and the island administrator Brian Lacey. In his opening statement, Lacey said, 'People locked their doors for

⁵¹ Office of the Administrator Indian Ocean Territories, 'Asylum Seeker Passive Protest March', Bulletin A26/2011, Christmas Island, 12 March 2011.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ 'Christmas Island detention centre hit by riots', *Guardian*, 18 March 2011, accessed 10 November 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/18/christmas-island-detention-centre-riots.

the first time.’⁵⁴ He noted that rumours were circulating and the meeting presented an opportunity for locals to ask questions.

When question time began, a microphone was passed around the room. Islanders yelled out, ‘Get the microphone, microphone’ if the questioner could not be heard. The more aggressive the attack on the official panel, the more cheers the questioner received. One islander raised the issue of inadequate consultation. He explained that for 16 years the island had received refugees, ‘We *had* a really good relationship [with refugees]’ and now there is ‘total disconnect’ between asylum seekers and islanders.⁵⁵

An islander asked the Immigration Department whether a head count had been completed to ‘make sure everyone was back as some people had been found at West White Beach’.⁵⁶ The Immigration Department representative answered, ‘Some clients move in and out of the vicinity of NWP.’ Andrew also noted that the ‘defence line’ between Lilac and Aqua had ‘been comprised’ but now a Serco and police presence was there.⁵⁷ Andrew also explained that there was ‘lots of consultation with clients’ and representatives from the Immigration Detention Advisory Group to negotiate with detainees. Andrew reported, ‘We are engaging with clients and hearing what they are saying.’⁵⁸ An islander responded, ‘You are listening to them more than us’, which was followed by cheers.⁵⁹ Another islander commented, ‘You [DIAC] are pulling on our community volunteers ... We are still in a reactive state. You [DIAC] used our volunteers to put out fires. It’s an absolute disgrace.’⁶⁰

Speaking of the detainees who walked around the Kampong, Othman, a leader in the Islamic community stated:

On Friday night, who are these people? I have got my kids and my wife. You [DIAC] have the power. They [detainees] came up to my wife. You [DIAC] say that they went for a walk. We can leave our

⁵⁴ Dimasi, Field notes, 17 March 2011.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

keys in our cars since the 1960s, 1970s ... We want guarantee that we can go back to our normal lives.⁶¹

Islander reactions at the community meeting reveal that asylum seekers were no longer the welcomed guests on Christmas Island that they had been previously. Instead, the local perception was that they were the 'undesirable foreigner' and 'enemy' that Derrida writes.⁶² Asylum seekers now presented a threat to the local community and the boundaries that distinguished host and guest had disintegrated.

Moral panic and boundary maintenance

There is a collective community view among islanders that Christmas Island is a safe, family space, which the community takes great pride in. During the riots, this came into question as people locked their doors and feared for their children. This caused much angst among the local community and was particularly obvious at the community meeting. Despite the island's extensive history of receiving asylum seekers, the question arises as to why there was such a significant shift in islander responses, particularly when only several months earlier local outpourings of compassion dominated the boat crash tragedy.

To understand these changes in islander responses, insights from conceptions of boundary maintenance and moral panic are illuminating. Sibley explains that boundaries are 'constructed, demolished and energized'.⁶³ It is not uncommon for people to make sense of the world by categorising social and spatial relations.⁶⁴ Examples include private versus public or adult versus child. Problems begin when the separation of categories is not possible, which in turn 'creates liminal zones or spaces of ambiguity and discontinuity' and becomes 'a source of anxiety'.⁶⁵ As hospitality is bound up in notions of the home and ethics, using the home as a starting point is insightful in this

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 55.

⁶³ David Sibley, *Geographies of exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge, 1995), 32.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 33.

context'.⁶⁶ When it comes to the home and the immediate space that intersects it, an ambiguous zone forms, making the distinction between the boundaries between private and public unclear. For example, someone might feel uncomfortable when a salesperson appears at the front door, as this person has transgressed the boundary of public into another's private space but has not actually entered the home. On Christmas Island, a categorisation exists between home and the detention centre. Islanders 'belong' *outside* the detention centre, where they dwell, while asylum seekers 'belong' *inside* the detention centre. An ambiguous liminal zone arises when it is no longer clear where asylum seekers belong and the question arises as to whether asylum seekers ought to be present in a space usually assigned to islanders? This contestable space was the source of islander anxiety during the riots.

Local fears during the riots were focused on perceptions of whether rioting and deviant behaviour would spill into homes. Asylum seekers had crossed a boundary and there was no longer a clear distinction as to how islanders and asylum seekers would be segregated. The genesis for this concern was in relation to local perceptions that asylum seekers 'belong' in the detention centre. This was captured in an ABC interview with, Shire President Gordon Thomson, who commented why islanders were concerned about the escape:

I think people do register some concern when people who are behind high wire get out from behind the wire ... The psychology of it is that people kept behind razor wire need to be kept there, so when they're not there people get a bit worried.⁶⁷

While islanders have often welcomed asylum seekers, Sibley argues that some communities who are indifferent to others most of the time can actually turn against outsiders.⁶⁸ When this happens, a moral panic may occur:

Moral panics heighten boundary consciousness but they are, by definition, episodic. Fears die down and people subsequently rub along with each other. Often, but not invariably, panics concern contested spaces, liminal zones which hostile communities are intent on

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) Ebook: 16–17.

⁶⁷ 'Another breakout on Christmas Island', ABC, 13 March 2011, accessed 21 November 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-13/another-breakout-on-christmas-island/2659760>.

⁶⁸ Sibley, 'Geographies of exclusion', 39.

eliminating by appropriating such spaces for themselves and excluding the offending 'other.'⁶⁹

Moral panic dictated Christmas Islander responses during the riots. Arguably, asylum seekers did not pose a threat to islanders; however, there was a perception that islander safety was compromised. During moral panics boundaries become 'charged and energized', while institutions such as the family or community spaces become important to defend, which was apparent at the community meeting.⁷⁰

In response to islander panic, the Immigration Department attempted to quell fears by announcing that there was now a strong police presence on the island:

Another contingent of AFP personnel arrived on Christmas Island last night. They brought with them a vehicle, ammunition ... A police dog was also brought in on the flight ... The increased presence of police in the community is not because of any perceived threat to the public but because of the obvious and understandable fear felt by some members of the community.⁷¹

The Immigration Department attempted to reduce islander anxieties by demonstrating that asylum seekers were now segregated from islanders. This was apparent when it sent out the following community update, 'North West Point is now secure and the electrified fence is operational. All people are accounted for and there has been no unrest within the immigration detention centre.'⁷² When further disturbances took place at the detention centre several months after the riots, the Immigration Department reminded islanders that this boundary remained in place, 'At no point has the external [detention centre] perimeter fence been breached ... The situation posed no threat to the Christmas Island community.'⁷³

Moral panics are 'episodic' and 'fears die down', which is exactly what occurred on Christmas Island.⁷⁴ Once order had been restored at the detention

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 46.

⁷¹ Office of the Administrator Indian Ocean Territories, 'Update on North West Point', Bulletin, A34/2011, Christmas Island, 20 March 2011.

⁷² DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 8 April 2011.

⁷³ DIAC, 'Community Update', Christmas Island, 25 July 2011.

⁷⁴ Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, 39.

centre and congestion at NWP was relieved when asylum seekers were transferred to mainland detention centres, islander concerns subsided. No longer did asylum seekers present a threat to the local community and the island returned to what islanders perceive it as: a safe, family space.

To comprehend this significant shift from hospitality to hostility, Bauman offers an explanation. He argues that most of human history has involved the following:

An alien could enter the radius of physical proximity only in one of three capacities: either as an enemy to be fought and expelled, or as an admittedly temporary guest to be confined to special quarters and rendered harmless by strict observance of the isolating ritual, or as neighbour-to-be which case he had to be made like [a] neighbour, that is to behave like the neighbours do.⁷⁵

On Christmas Island, asylum seekers have been situated in all three of these categories. In some instances, asylum seekers, including the survivors have been confined to the detention centre, where they have been 'rendered harmless' by the community while being under guard. Consequently, islander responses have never been opposed to asylum seekers in these circumstances. Asylum seekers have also lived in the community, and it has only been when asylum seekers have not integrated into the community that local responses have been negative. Finally, during the riots, asylum seekers became the hostile enemy for islanders as they came into close proximity and islanders perceived their island home and values under threat.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how boundaries were 'constructed, demolished and energized' as hospitality shifted to hostility in context of the two critical events on Christmas Island.⁷⁶ Responses during the boat crash and riots were polarised in relation to how islanders positioned themselves to asylum seekers as these events unfolded. In the case of the boat crash, boundaries were 'demolished' as islanders saw only the asylum seeker stranger in desperate need of help. As islanders bore witness to the suffering of asylum seekers

⁷⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): 150.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 32.

drowning, they responded quickly to rescue them. Consequently, this tragedy resulted in islanders feeling a sense of a shared experience with the survivors. This built upon earlier collective islander/asylum seeker experiences such as during the Tampa affair protests. As a way of acknowledging this shared experience, islanders worked towards being reunited with the survivors despite the Immigration Department's efforts to limit this.

During the riots, islander responses changed to panic and perceiving asylum as a threat. This can be attributed to the way in which detention has constructed a boundary between islanders and asylum seekers, which over time has led to islanders associating the detention centre as the place where asylum seekers belong. When asylum seekers escaped from NWP, islanders maintained that the detention boundary needed to be reinstated, claiming that asylum seekers had become intruders. It was only after the asylum seekers were returned to the detention centre that islander concerns subsided and asylum seekers were once again 'rendered harmless'.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Conclusion

As I complete my thesis in late 2014, the Christmas Island story continues to evolve. No longer do islanders witness asylum seekers being brought ashore to Flying Fish Cove. Gone are the days of islanders welcoming asylum seekers. The Christmas Island border economy that burgeoned over the past few years has begun to dwindle. The island has almost come to a standstill and the field site that I witnessed transform over three years has come full circle.

When the Abbott Coalition Government came to power in September 2013, it introduced a new suite of policies to deter asylum seekers. These include Operation Sovereign Borders, a military-led, whole-of-government approach to prevent asylum seekers making the journey to Australia, including turning back boats. The Abbott Government continues and has expanded Labor's reopening of offshore detention sites that took hold from July 2013. Asylum seekers who have arrived by boat in Australia after 19 July 2013 are not eligible to apply for asylum in Australia. Instead, most were transferred to Nauru and Papua New Guinea, where their protection claims are being assessed and plans made for resettlement in those countries or in Cambodia. No asylum seeker has been spared from this policy and those transferred have included pregnant women and young children. After the SIEV 221 boat crash, asylum seeker policy has been constructed around the myth that it prevents asylum seekers from drowning at sea.¹

Since December 2013, there has been a significant decrease in asylum seeker boats, with only one to enter Australian waters since December 2013.² The only vessels that now come to the Christmas Island port are ships to collect phosphate, supply ships and the odd yacht. With boat arrivals once again

¹ Ghassan Nakhoul, *Overboard: You Would not Believe What Really Triggered Australia's Controversial Policy on Boat People* (Merrylands, Dar Meera, 2011).

² Operation Sovereign Borders: Log of boat arrivals and other asylum seeker incidents, ABC, 7 November 2014, accessed 25 November 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-25/log-of-boat-arrivals-and-other-asylum-seeker-incidents/5014496>.

located to the island's past, the story of islander hospitality is put on hold. In mid-2014, when I was on Christmas Island, an eerie silence hung over the island. Restaurants were empty and the hustle and bustle of detention staff moving around the island had almost ceased. Detainees were regularly being transferred offshore and some of the island's detention centres were already decommissioned. Today, North West Point has less than 400 detainees. Low detainee numbers means fewer detention staff and a reduction in local business and services. Concerns that islanders had once expressed to me about the future of Christmas Island, particularly if there was no longer a detention centre, are now very real. The words of an islander participant who once said the island's economy was 'built on sand' reinforce the current situation facing the island.

The Christmas Island story: 1992–2011

For more than a decade, asylum seekers on Christmas Island have been in the political spotlight. Often, the focus is on how the government will stop asylum seeker boats arriving on Christmas Island while political action is dominated by what Australian voters think should happen to asylum seekers. By way of contrast, little attention has been given to the people of Christmas Island who witnessed the reality of asylum policies in everyday life. This thesis sought to remedy this absence by exploring how islanders encountered asylum seekers from 1992 to 2011 through extensive ethnographic research on Christmas Island. The study was the first of its kind to chronologically record islander responses across a significant time period in relation to Australia's asylum seeker policy.

To understand what meaning could be made from islander responses, I began by addressing the island's history of marginalisation in order to show the link between islanders' shared experiences of oppression with asylum seekers. Arendt famously once wrote that refugees are the 'the scum of the earth' because 'once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they left their state they became stateless, once they had been deprived of their human rights, they were rightless'.³ Islanders have seen themselves similarly

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Florida: Harcourt, 1968): 267.

in the sense that they were once rightless and suffered at the hands of the Australian Government. What became apparent was that the island's history of marginalisation provided a platform for some islanders when interviewed about asylum seekers and was a way to frame community protests, particularly during the Tampa affair.

The physical proximity islanders have had to asylum seekers has always precipitated a response which at times led to the subsequent formation of moral and narrative proximity. To interpret these responses, hospitality proved to be a good starting point. The parable of the Good Samaritan is well known and is a common metaphor for someone who encounters a stranger in need and selflessly assists. As boats arrived on Christmas Island, islanders reached out to strangers. Many islanders acted in the spirit of being a Good Samaritan, initiating spontaneous acts of hospitality. For some islanders, this went beyond acts of welcome to include refugee advocacy and activism. This came about from hearing the stories of asylum seekers first hand and witnessing their suffering. Islanders not only took responsibility for living asylum seekers but also the dead. Today, memorials and gravesites dot the island's landscape and are a regular reminder of those asylum seekers who never made it to the island.

Hospitality involves the temporal sharing of space and an opening up of one's home to share with the stranger. However, demarcation of boundaries between host and the guest is central to this arrangement. Immigration detention has been instrumental in creating this boundary and has dictated host-guest relations. This thesis outlined the history of detention on Christmas Island and how at different stages created contradictory islander-asylum seeker relations. Detention was an important factor in how islanders spatially relate to asylum seekers, as it controls the proximity islanders have to asylum seekers.

The research showed the nascence of a 'border economy' on Christmas Island.⁴ By mid-2009, no longer were islander responses about the plight of asylum seekers, but rather how asylum seekers were a commodity, burden

⁴ Heidrun Friese, 'Border Economies: Lampedusa and the nascent migration industry', *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, 6, no. 2, (2012): 66–84.

and a threat to the local population. As the detention industry boomed, asylum seekers became problematic for the Christmas Island host community. Despite the local economy benefiting, islander concerns grew with the shortages of resources and services. Islanders perceived asylum seekers as receiving preferential treatment, which created resentment.

The changing nature of hospitality was exemplified by examining the 2010 boat crash and the riots of 2011. These two events, which occurred only several months apart, showed that islander responses to asylum seekers are never fixed but fluctuate according to critical events at that point in time. This study has revealed the paradoxical nature of islander responses and shown that Australia's asylum seeker policy provides an important context when interpreting these responses.

Beyond Christmas Island

Despite Australian public concerns about the social and economic impact of asylum seekers, little research has been conducted into the actual impact, particularly at the local level.⁵ To date, research about detention host communities in Australia has been minimal with only two other detention host communities in South Australia to be examined.⁶ Studies into the Woodside community that hosts the Inverbrackie facility have found that local concerns about the social and economic impact of asylum seekers were not borne out.⁷ However, the Christmas Island case study reveals a contrasting story with the impact of asylum seekers being quite significant and permeating into most aspects of every day island life.

These differentiating findings suggest that further studies need to be conducted into the impact asylum seekers have on local host communities. A

⁵ Every et al., 'The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities', 175.

⁶ See, Faith Curtis and Kathleen Mee, 'Welcome to Woodside: Inverbrackie Alternative Place of Detention and performances of belonging in Woodside, South Australia, and Australia', *Australian Geographer*, 43, no. 4 (2012): 357–375; Natascha Klocker, 'Community antagonism towards asylum seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia', *Australian Geographical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2004): 1–17; and Every et al., 'The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities: A South Australian case study', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48, no. 2 (2013): 173–196.

⁷ Danielle Every and Martha Augoustinos, 'Hard Hearts: A critical look at Liberal humanitarianism in refugee support movements', *Refugee Review: Social Movement*, 1, (2013): 62; Every et al., 'The social and economic impacts of immigration detention facilities', 189.

comparative study across different host communities would provide new insights. Furthermore, Christmas Island has shown that local contexts are important when studying a host community. For some islanders, their responses were tied up in local histories.

The research has shown how the government implements detention policies in remote places and how this leads to the rise of a border economy. This raises questions about the implications that asylum policies create for other host communities that witness asylum seeker policies. For example, in Weipa, far north Queensland the Immigration Department failed to consult with the Aboriginal traditional landowners over the opening of Scherger detention centre.⁸ The implementation of detention policies raises important questions around the human rights of marginalised communities as the government pursues its quest for border protection.

The topic of asylum seekers in Australia and internationally is contentious. It dominates political debates about how states will protect their borders from the asylum seeker Other. Consequently, negative perceptions and attitudes towards asylum seekers are not uncommon. This research has shown contrasting islander responses to asylum seekers, which have ranged from positive to negative at different points in time. This research contributes to an understanding about what factors may lead people to welcoming asylum seekers in some instances or responding to them with hostility. Islander responses to asylum seekers add to a deeper understanding of human relationships that can be explored further.

In an age where the dehumanisation and repelling of asylum seekers continues to proliferate as a way of promoting border security, Christmas Island offers an alternative discourse about the importance of taking responsibility for one another, particularly in the sphere of human rights. Host communities such as Christmas Island are telling of how hospitality and welcome can be promoted for asylum seekers who are in need of assistance and support. Detention not only impacts on the human rights of those detained but is also distressing for communities that bear witness to the

⁸ Heather Beck, 'Scherger "not supported"', *Weekend Post*, 1 October 2011, 20.

harshness of detention. Further inquiry into communities that host detention populations would extend our understanding into the impact of detention.

In the final stages of completing my thesis draft, I showed my chapter about the Tampa affair to Mohammad, an Afghan asylum seeker who was on the MV *Tampa*. He knew little of what happened on Christmas Island at that time. He later told me, 'The response by the Christmas Island community is really amazing. I did not know much about how the island was affected by the arrivals. As a proud Afghan with great claims of alleged hospitality I was overwhelmed by the extent of generosity shown by people of a small island.'⁹ When government policies result in the demonisation and rejection of asylum seekers, the documentation of islander responses reveals new truths and gives hope to humanity.

⁹ Mohammed, personal communication with Dimasi, 11 November 2014.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

When did you come to the island? Did you come for work, family or were born here?

What are some of the negative aspects of living on the island?

What are some the positive aspects of living on the island?

Would you say it takes a certain type of person to live here?

Comment on Margaret Neale (author of *We Are the Christmas Islanders*) statement that CI is “a paradise for some, a prison for others, for most it is both”.

Would you say that Christmas Island has its own culture or identity?

What does it mean to be Christmas Island local?

What can you remember about the first boat arrivals to the island?

Tampa: Were you here? If yes, what were some of your memories of this event? What was the community reaction? How did you feel about it?

Excision from the migration zone: What do you know about excision?

Detention Centre

What do you think about it? What is your impression of it?

Asylum Seekers

How do you feel about having asylum seekers living in your community?

Describe the community response to asylum seekers.

In what ways do asylum seekers impact on the residents?

Future: What do you envisage for the future of the island? Will you stay here?

Appendix 2

ETHICS CLEARANCE AND DECLARATION

I, Michelle Jasmin Dimasi declare that SUHREC Project 0708/181 Christmas Island Australia's Asylum Seeker Policy ensured the following:

- Ethics clearance conditions were all properly met.
- All annual and final reports were submitted.

Michelle Dimasi
December 2014

(28/05/2008) Keith Wilkins - SUHREC Project 0708/181 Ethics Clearance

Page 1

From: Keith Wilkins
To: Klaus Neumann; Michelle Dimasi
Date: 28/05/2008 4:20 pm
Subject: SUHREC Project 0708/181 Ethics Clearance

To: Prof Klaus Neumann/Ms Michelle Dimasi

Dear Klaus and Michelle

SUHREC Project 0708/181 Christmas Island and Australia's Asylum Seeker Policy
Prof K Neumann FLSS Ms Michelle Dimasi
Approved Duration: 01/07/2008 To 01/07/2011

I refer to the ethical review of the above project revised protocol undertaken by Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Your responses to the review as emailed on 27 May 2005, with revised consent instruments attached, were put to a delegate of SUHREC for consideration/endorsement.

I am pleased to advise that the project (as submitted to date) has approval to proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions here outlined.

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.
- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.
- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/ clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.
- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.

Please contact me if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance. The SUHREC project number should be quoted in communication.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely

Keith Wilkins
Secretary, SUHREC

Keith Wilkins
Research Ethics Officer

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- Briskman, Linda and **Michelle Dimasi [50%]**, 'Not quite Australia', in *Enter at Own Risk: Australia's Population Questions for the 21st Century*, ed. Suvendrini Perera, Graham Seal and Sue Summers (Perth: Black Swan Press, 2010): 141–59
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