Resistance and visibility:
How technology has promoted activism from Australia's black sites

Michelle Bui
Curtin University
michelle.bui@curtin.edu.au

Abstract: The rise of social media platforms and online communication channels has strengthened the ability of Australia's political prisoners to form connections with the world beyond the fences. People who were previously rendered invisible by the Australian Immigration Department are now increasingly participating in public forums and gaining access to platforms through which they are able to reclaim control over how their experiences are recorded and represented. Technology has permitted the documentation and transmission of actions of resistance from within Australia's immigration prisons in the form of written testimonies, photos, videos and audio recordings. Access to information and the ability to develop strong connections and working relationships has in turn impacted upon how community based activists articulate solidarity. The increase in information associated with these relatively new communication channels, which include Facebook and other messaging applications have not yet manifest in substantive policy change; however, they have presented serious challenges to the standard operating procedures of the immigration detention regime. This paper will explore examples of how technology has promoted activism from Australia's black sites and some of the actors involved in the creation and dissemination of this work.

Keywords: activism; political prisoners; refugees.

Australia's offshore prisons in the Pacific, officially known as regional processing centres, are operated under a veil of secrecy, outside of an effective state jurisdiction

and with little independent oversight. This has led to their characterisation as black sites, as articulated by Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites (RAPBS) who state,

> Black sites is a term that has been widely used in the war on terror to describe locations where the US and its allies maintain secret prisons or conduct other illicit activities away from public or legal scrutiny. These sites are characterised by secrecy and lack of accountability. They are most often located in racialized and/or formerly colonized territories, and they continue practices of abuse and torture perpetrated there against colonized peoples. We refer to Australia's camps on its own former colonial territories of Manus Island, PNG, and Nauru as black sites in order to highlight their structural connections with other extra-legal or illegal places of confinement, abuse and torture ... Australia's black sites, we argue, are precisely those extrajudicial spaces where people of colour are imprisoned and tortured through the exercise of sovereign forms of white, settler-colonial violence. (RAPBS, What are Black Sites?, 2015)

Australia's neo-colonial strategy of appropriating neighbouring Pacific island nations for sites of carceral punishment effectively expands the border zone to distance its extremities from public view in an attempt to render the plight of Australia's political prisoners invisible. Imprisoning asylum seekers in remote sites within Australia is a strategy that has been persistently employed by the Australian government. Historically, remote mainland detention sites have included Christmas Island, Curtin, Leonora, Port Hedland, Scherger, Woomera and Baxter (Phillips, 2013). The introduction of the 'Pacific Solution' in 2001, effectively remade the Australian border, expanding it to annex the sovereign space of other states for its own uses. Aside from enacting the punitive agenda of 'deterrence,' the removal of refugee bodies to spaces of indeterminate sovereignty reflects an attempt to relocate responsibility, deflect blame and allow these exceptional spaces to operate outside the law with diminished mechanisms for accountability (Perera, 2007, pp. 206-207). Australian media are routinely denied access to the camps on Manus and Nauru, and secrecy clauses pervade the contracts of the private companies and NGOs complicit in their operation. In these sites, mobile phones have at times been rendered contraband, and communication with advocates, media and human rights organisations outside the camps has exposed both prisoners and employees to considerable personal risk. Despite these risks, the vast majority of knowledge in the public domain has been sourced from people who are themselves subject to Australia's violent detention regime.

For as long as there has been violence enacted upon the bodies of asylum seekers and refugees there has, too, been resistance. Actions of resistance have ranged in nature and scale, from working within Department of Immigration, Serco and IHMS complaint systems, in addition to lodging complaints with human rights bodies, to defying the system itself by smuggling contraband goods into the centres, talking to journalists, in addition to more direct actions where people have used their bodies to challenge the system. In the early 2000s one of the primary means of resistance were protest actions which were intended to increase visibility through media coverage and thus help challenge the information blackout. At this time, however, prisoners were rarely able to speak directly for themselves to narrate or explain their own actions, thus their intent could easily be misconstrued or manipulated to suit alternative agendas (Fiske, 2012, p.

2). In recent years, the ability of Australia's political prisoners[1] to speak to their own actions and enter into and challenge mainstream discourses has increased significantly.

This paper will explore how social media platforms and online communication channels have strengthened the ability of Australia's political prisoners to reach through the wire, to defy fences, seas and borders, and connect with people who the government does not want their voices to reach. It will consider the volume of knowledge available prior to the rise of technology-driven communication and how technology has influenced the actions that prisoners engage in, supported their agency, and shifted the role of Australian activists to respond to and amplify the voices that can now be heard more clearly.

Illuminating the black sites

The 'Pacific Solution' was first announced in September 2001 in the aftermath of the 'Tampa Affair.'[2] The subsequent excision of particular Australian territories from the Australian migration zone, including Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef and the Cocos Islands, resulted in people who arrived in these excised zones being classified as "offshore entry persons" who were then barred from making a visa application in Australia. "Offshore entry persons" could then be taken to Nauru and PNG for "processing" (Mansted, 2007, pp. 1-2). The first iteration of the 'Pacific Solution' (2001-2007) marked the beginning of the 'deterrence' policies that persist today. In 2012, the Labor government reopened the camps on Manus and Nauru. The current iteration of the 'Pacific Solution' has emphasised resettlement in their countries of incarceration, or a third country, like Cambodia, that are seen as unattractive destinations. A very small number of people have been resettled in the U.S. and offers have been made by the New Zealand government; however, the Australian government has continuously refused to accept responsibility and provide resettlement.

Behrouz Boochani writes from the Manus prison, "Our legal status as individuals has been suspended and we become legally un-nameable beings, transformed into animals devoid of dignity" (Boochani, 2016a). In line with this perspective and akin to Joshua Comaroff's analysis of Guantanamo Bay, it can be said that Australia's Pacific black sites function "within a deliberate series of legal and geographical contradictions" that are tactical in nature and within a "system by which a detainee may be 'rendered' among different nation-states and legal norms." Like the "effective but not ultimate sovereignty" of the United States over Guantanamo, Australia can be understood to have "effective but not ultimate sovereignty" over the camps, and refugee status determination and resettlement processes on Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Comaroff, 2007, pp. 397-398).

How activists and the wider Australian community have been able to understand and engage with these processes and conditions has shifted considerably since 2001. It can be argued that this is largely a result of increased access to information and direct lines of communication with people on the ground. Technological advances and the availability of mobile phones have facilitated outlets for activism that were previously either more difficult or not possible to access.

The first iteration of the 'Pacific Solution' under the Howard Government was at a time where mobile phones were becoming more widely available. Attempts were made to smuggle them into the detention network; however, access remained heavily restricted (Briskman, 2013, pp. 14-15). Camera phones, in particular, have been critical in documenting abuses, conditions and incidents within these black sites; however, the world's first camera phone was only released in Japan in 2000 (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2015). Facebook, which has now become one of the primary means of communication with people incarcerated both in Australia and on Manus and Nauru, was first launched in 2004 and was only extended beyond educational institutions in 2006 (Phillips, 2007) and messaging applications like WhatsApp, IMO, Viber, Line, Telegram and Signal are all very recent developments. Previously, letter writing and the restricted use of landline phones and detention centre computers were relied upon; however, these channels could easily be subject to censorship. In addition, the number of people in any given centre would significantly outnumber the number of available phones and computers, and in remote sites internet access was slow and unreliable (Briskman, 2013, p. 14).

As a result of the limited avenues of communication, access to information was largely contingent on the ability of journalists and independent oversight bodies to gain access to the centres. Announced inspections and guided tours, however, cannot provide a holistic understanding of a prisoner's experience. In theory, prisoners could use fixed landline telephones to speak with the media, but given the limited number of phones and queues for their use, prospects for doing so remained limited. Some people chose to speak out; however, many were concerned that telephone calls were being monitored by immigration and understandably feared possible repercussions (Briskman, 2013, p. 16). Now, letter writing has largely been replaced by instant messaging and the increased accessibility of personal mobile phones permit relatively free disclosure.

Currently in most mainland immigration detention centres, a discriminatory policy operates whereby people who arrived in Australia by plane are permitted to have a mobile phone (without a camera or internet connectivity); however, those who arrived by boat are not. Possession of contraband phones in some cases allows additional communication channels to remain open, however, exposes people to potential risks and consequences. Attempts to thwart access to mobile phones have continued as evidenced by an attempt to ban all mobile phones in mainland centres and on Christmas Island. This is a strategy likely intended to assist Serco, who are contracted to operate and provide security in the mainland centres, to detect and confiscate contraband phones, and break established communication channels. Legal challenges to the ban successfully secured an injunction; however, it is likely a temporary solution to ongoing challenges to phone access which at present remains inequitable (National Justice Project, 2017).

In recent years, most remote mainland Australian detention centres have been closed down. The location of centres in urban or suburban areas has meant that physical accessibility and scope for face-to-face visits have generally improved despite increasingly stringent 'security' measures. Within Australia, surveillance and monitoring systems are more restrictive than on Manus and Nauru thus rendering devices deemed to be 'contraband' more difficult to obtain. Despite this, communication channels remain strong, such that where protests, deportations, deaths

and other incidents have occurred, activists are quickly alerted and are able to respond or release information to the media before notification through official channels occurs.

Lucy Fiske's PhD Thesis "Insider Resistance: Understanding Refugee Protest Against Immigration Detention in Australia, 1999-2005" identifies that according to the people she interviewed, reaching the media was the primary consideration in organising protests inside the camps (Fiske, 2012, p. 129). Some prisoners developed an awareness of how protest actions could be manipulated to reinforce the portrayal of refugees as 'uncivilised,' 'barbaric' and 'other' to the Australian citizenry. Negative representations affirmed the government's argument that asylum seekers presented a criminal threat; however, they could not be easily avoided due to the Department's ability to frame events with their own narratives and disseminate those narratives to a wide audience. There were few platforms from which alternative perspectives could be presented. Often the only power prisoners could exercise was over their own bodies. Consequently, acts of resistance often included participation in hunger strikes, lip stitching, rooftop protests or breaches of the fences.

While people continue to use their bodies to make visible the violence they have been subjected to, there are now more alternative outlets for expression available. Access to technology, for example, has meant that people in detention can directly respond to comments and allegations made by the Immigration Minister, more easily disseminate journalistic or creative writing, and enter into existing public forums, which are deemed to be more "socially acceptable" than protest actions. This has helped increase the credibility and visibility of activists inside the camps. To some extent it has allowed prisoners to move away from more marginal spaces and have their voices reach different audiences, some of whom are in greater positions of power than typically sympathetic constituencies. Penetration into mainstream media, however, still remains limited.

The presence of camera phones in detention centres today means that the production of images from protest actions can often be controlled by those organising and participating in the protests. While journalists would previously have to travel to these sites to obtain photographs and video footage, which they would frame from their own vantage point, now activists inside the camps can share their own images on social media, or in some cases send journalists photographs for inclusion in articles and reports. This is exemplified by the peaceful demonstrations on Nauru which began on 20 March 2016 and persisted for 238 consecutive days until 12 November 2016. These protests involved two groups—asylum seekers in the detention centre and refugees in the 'resettlement' camp opposite. Despite the governments of Nauru and Australia declaring the camp to be an "open camp," a gesture intended to thwart court challenges to the legality of "detention" (Perera and Pugliese, 2015), the positioning of people behind the fences was a very deliberate and symbolic representation of the ongoing denial of freedom despite the eased restrictions on physical movement. Messages on banners and placards served to reinforce the visual symbolism of how bodies were positioned and framed. These messages helped prisoners to narrate their own actions and ensure that observers could quickly gain an understanding of their grievances and intent (Figures 1-3). More recently, prisoners on Manus Island have used a Telegram channel (https://t.me/ManusAlert/) to broadcast statements, articles and photos of protests in the lead up to the forced 'closure' of the camp on 31 October 2017.

Figure 1. Day 200 of Peaceful Protests, Nauru, 5 October 2016, image: supplied.

Figure 2. Children protest, Nauru, image: supplied.

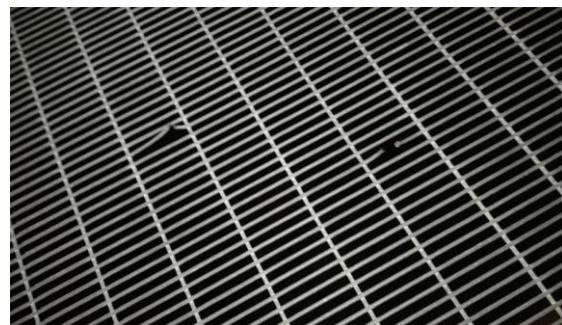Figure 3. Australia. What is Justice? Nauru, image: supplied.

Figure 4. 14 April 2017 Shooting Manus Island, image: supplied.

Camera phones have also allowed for the documentation of incidents and provision of photographic evidence. In several instances this has been useful in order to refute false claims or challenge evasive statements made by the Government. This was evident in April 2017 when bullets were fired into the Manus Island immigration prison and the Immigration Department provided minimal comment but instead made the statement that "There are reports PNG military personnel discharged a weapon into the air during the incident" (cited in Tlozek, 2017). Photos published by men detained in the prison on social media accounts and published by journalists clearly depicted a different story. Images of bullet holes through fences and steel sections combined with statements and testimony provided by the men helped construct a counter-narrative against which Immigration Minister Peter Dutton's statements had to be measured (Figure 4). It then became clear that bullets were fired into accommodation blocks and that men had been at risk of being shot.

Throughout the current iteration of the 'Pacific Solution' the accessibility of online communication channels has allowed some light to be shed where previously an almost impenetrable information blackout existed. While Australia's prisoners remain physically remote, their voices are increasingly transcending the steel fences and making their way into Australian media, social media and public spaces. Information can be relayed to journalists, many of whom have established direct lines of communication with activists inside the camps. This has allowed for a much larger volume of media reporting both in Australia and internationally.

Speaking for themselves

Australian advocates and human rights supporters are often quick to highlight the apparent absence of journalists from these sites; however, there are both professional journalists and citizen journalists incarcerated within the camps who are constantly reporting on incidents and conditions and whose work should be acknowledged. What was initially a trickle of information has become a flood of evidence of violence and abuse in the form of photographs, videos, audio recordings, and visual and written testimonies. This documentation, investigation and reporting has enabled the construction of a powerful counter-narrative that challenges mainstream discourses around 'border protection' and 'saving lives at sea.' Incarcerated writers, poets and artists have also published work from behind the wire that can be appreciated as forms of art in their own right but equally as acts of resistance and bodies of evidence. The increasing presence of asylum seekers and refugees in the public discourse has challenged the passive victim archetypes too often ascribed to refugees. Australia's political prisoners are not objects upon which the State can exert violence and absolute power, they have less power than the government but they are not powerless; they are engaged in an unequal struggle for the restoration of their rights (Fiske, 2012, p. 248).

In the early 2000s people did manage to smuggle out some notes and make telephone calls to media and Australian supporters; however, their voices were largely marginal to more dominant ones. Aamer Sultan recognised the absence of "detainee" voices in the public discourse and attempted to "try be the voice from inside" (Fiske, 2012, p. 145). Aamer is an Iraqi doctor who was incarcerated in Villawood for over three years who was determined to use his professional status as a doctor to bring credibility to observations about the mental health impact that detention has on people. In collaboration with an Australian psychologist, he had research published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 2001 while he was still in detention. He was in contact with a journalist, Jacquie Everitt, who helped smuggle a camera into Villawood (Fiske, 2012, pp. 145-147). In August 2001, footage recorded by Aamer aired on national television. It was of an interview with Saeed Badraie, the father of seriously ill six-year-old Shayan Badraie who, during the interview, sat limp on his lap. As a young child, Shayan had witnessed multiple suicide attempts, suffered from nightmares, and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. It was the first time that footage had been taken inside a detention centre without the government having editorial control. It caused national outcry and shortly after, Shayan was transferred into foster care. Five months later he was reunited with his mother and baby sister, and by August 2002 the entire family was reunited and granted temporary protection visas. They were later awarded financial compensation by the Federal Government for the psychological harm that Shayan had suffered.

There are other examples of people speaking out whilst in detention and upon release, including Shahin Shafaei, who is a playwright, actor, college lecturer and activist who wrote and performed *Refugitive,* a play about hunger strikes in detention, following his release (Fiske, 2012, pp. 137-138). While it was uncommon to hear directly from people in immigration detention during the early 2000s when mobile phones were not widely

available, there were some people who worked very hard to give people the opportunity to hear their voices.

There are many contemporary examples of individuals who have spoken about their experiences and sought to inform people about the reality of the detention system. Among those are Hani Abdile, Behrouz Boochani, 'Eaten Fish' and Abdul Aziz Muhamat, each of whom has made a significant contribution to our collective knowledge and understanding of Australia's remote immigration prisons. They have skilfully used the channels of information exchange and dissemination that have been available to them.

Hani Abdile is a poet, writer and advocate who fled Somalia in 2013 and now lives in Sydney. She started to write while held in Australia's immigration prison on Christmas Island, where she was detained for about 18 months. During this period she learned to read and write, which proved to be a source of strength and empowerment. She describes writing as a "weapon against stress and despair" and as "a way of healing and relief." She recalls how one day she posted a poem on Facebook entitled "Freedom for Education" following which she received a message from Janet Galbraith, coordinator of the Writing Through Fences group. At the time Hani did not consider herself a poet; however, this conversation marked the beginning of a strong personal and professional relationship (Abdile, 2016, pp. 1-7). Hani became involved in the Writing Through Fences group which functioned as a supportive and nurturing predominantly online community of writers and poets. This group has also provided an outlet through which currently and formerly detained writers can publish and disseminate their work. From 2015, Hani has also shared her work on a Facebook page entitled "Thoughts of Freedom" which helped her connect with other people in the Australian community. Technology continues to be an important tool that Hani and others have used to help amplify their voices and experiences both before and after they are released from detention. Since Hani has been living in the community, she has performed around Australia including at the Sydney Opera House, been the recipient of numerous performance and community leadership awards, and has had her work published in literary journals, online and in anthologies. In 2016, she published and launched her first collection of prose and poetry entitled *I Will Rise* (Abdile, 2016, pp. 4-6).

Behrouz Boochani is a Kurdish journalist and human rights defender who is currently incarcerated in the Manus Prison. He has had articles published in various online media sites and journals and has had his work recognised by PEN. In 2015, Behrouz lent his voice to co-narrate the short film *Nowhere Line* directed by Lukas Schrank. In June 2016, he sent a pre-recorded video question for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that was aired on the Q&A television program and in October 2016 he participated in the "Diaspora Symposium" held in Sydney via video-link. He co-directed a feature film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, which was shot with his mobile phone and produced in collaboration with filmmaker Arash Kamali Sarvestani who is based in the Netherlands. This film premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2017 and has since been screened elsewhere across Australia and internationally, including in London and Glasgow. The accessibility of the camera phone allowed Behrouz to participate in and undertake these endeavours and become one of the most important voices in challenging the government's offshore detention policies. Of the film, Boochani writes, "Chauka is the name of a famous special bird in Manus Island that I love. It is also the

name of solitary confinement unit in Manus prison" (Boochani 2016b). A description of the film states,

> At the heart of the film, the central thread around which all the others are woven—is the chauka, a bird that is sacred and central to Manus Island culture. The camera roams through the centre, and beyond, and conveys the torturous ordeal endured by the 900 men, incarcerated in the prime of their life, for over 40 months now, endlessly waiting, aimlessly pacing, enduring the heat, the erosion of hope, and destruction of the spirit ... Through an ongoing conversation with several Manus Island men, we begin to understand the deep significance of the bird, and the ongoing colonial history of the island. We come to see the cruel irony—the name of a bird that means so much in Manus Island culture, being used as the name for a high security prison within the wider prison, which, for a time, was a place of isolation, and punishment. We come to understand that the appropriation of the chauka, as a name for a place of such abuse and suffering, is obscene, and reflective of the neo-colonial system on which the offshore detention system is based. (IMDB, 2016)

This unprecedented film, as a narrative framed, filmed and controlled by a prisoner recognised for his sophisticated political analysis, is a powerful challenge to the Australian government. Life in detention is a battle for control and Behrouz has been successful in preserving his agency and overcoming attempts to silence him. The volume and variety of journalistic and creative work that he has been able to undertake from within the Manus Prison has been permitted by the technology-driven communication channels that he has been able to access. Recording devices, mobile phones and messaging applications have allowed him to reach out to the outside world and collaborate with fellow activists, journalists and other allies. Ten years ago, these opportunities would have been far more limited, which to some extent explains why the world's understanding of the camps on Manus and Nauru was far less comprehensive than it is today.

Eaten Fish is an Iranian artist and political cartoonist, named Ali, who was incarcerated in the Manus prison. Ali suffers from extreme OCD, panic attacks and complex PTSD, he was seriously assaulted in the Manus prison and endured ongoing sexual harassment; his work speaks directly to the nightmarish world that he was enmeshed in. Recently he was awarded the 2016 Award for Courage in Editorial Cartooning from Cartoonists Rights Network International (CRNI) (Perera and Pugliese, 2016).

CRNI wrote,

> The importance of the work of human rights defenders, artists, cartoonists and writers, such as Eaten Fish, within the prison camp cannot be overstated. Nor can the fact that they are at further risk of violence each time they create, speak, draw or write. Eaten Fish is one of those whose work as a cartoonist brings to light the horrors that are happening around him. CRNI believes that his body of work will be recognized as some of the most important in documenting and communicating the human rights abuses and excruciating agony of daily life in this notorious and illegal prison

camp. His work pushes through the veil of secrecy and silence and layers of fences in a way that only a talented artist speaking from the inside can. (CRNI, 2016)

In early 2015, award-winning cartoonist First Dog on the Moon connected with Eaten Fish online. In July 2016, he helped launch a campaign that invited cartoonists to draw cartoons in support of the "Save Eaten Fish" campaign (https://eatenfish.com), urging the Australian government to bring him to Australia for specialised medical treatment. Countless renowned Australian cartoonists including David Pope, Cathy Wilcox and David Rowe have made contributions. In December 2017, after more than four years in limbo, Eaten Fish left Papua New Guinea after securing an artist residency through the International Cities of Refuge Network. This was only made possible by the sustained advocacy of the cartoonists' network, Janet Galbraith and First Dog on the Moon (Doherty, 2017).

Another project that demonstrates the possibilities permitted by access to relatively new communication channels is *The Messenger*, an award-winning 10-part podcast series produced by Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. This project is a collaboration between Abdul Aziz, a community leader, writer and activist incarcerated in the Manus prison and Michael Green, a Melbourne-based journalist. Over the course of about a year, the two men exchanged thousands of voice messages via the messaging app, WhatsApp; these include autobiographical detail about Abdul Aziz's flight from Sudan, and the experiences he has been subject to after being sent to Manus Island, which include intimate details about the day-to-day struggles that people face in the camp. These messages were collected and composed into a series of podcasts that people can access or download online (The Wheeler Centre, 2017). In this way, the voice of a man who is being held on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean can theoretically be accessed by anyone with an internet connection. Likewise, Abdul Aziz has been given a platform that a decade ago simply did not exist.

Technology has permitted important interventions and dialogue and as a result solidarity is taking new forms and arising from different sectors of society. Hani Abdile has been acknowledged among communities of poets, Behrouz Boochani has been acknowledged by writers and journalists, Eaten Fish has gained the respect and support of fellow political cartoonists, and Abdul Aziz has gained from human rights activists and community members. These individuals, among others, provide evidence that Australia's political prisoners are more than capable of speaking for themselves, which signals to Australian activists that the best thing we can do is make space for and support the work that they are doing.

Shifting modes of solidarity and resistance

The connections facilitated by online communication platforms has reframed the positioning of asylum seekers and refugees from subjects of activism to active participants, who are not only included but are increasingly acknowledged as the leaders of the resistance movement. The ability to connect with people in detention has prompted greater pursuit of platforms for people to speak for themselves. This is not

universally recognised and understood by Australian advocates, activists and the broader community; however, the work of individuals and organisations like RISE (Refugees Survivors and Ex-Detainees) is instructive. RISE is the first refugee and asylum seeker directed welfare and advocacy organisation in Australia, entirely governed by refugees, asylum seekers and ex-detainees. RISE pursue a strong "nothing about us without us" position and are often critical of how some refugee support groups and organisations engage with refugee rights activism (http://riserefugee.org).

Actions of solidarity are increasingly based on the messages and actions that activists inside the camps are taking. Rather than Australian activists attempting to speak for or over people, there is a growing recognition that their role is to amplify the voices, demands and political acts of those who are living with the consequences of government policy. This includes efforts to increase the visibility of camp-based protests and promote the messages of Australia's political prisoners in our public spaces. Examples of this can be seen when activists replicate banners (Figures 5 and 6), shirts or images from protest actions on Manus and Nauru (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 5. Protest on Nauru, 2012, image: supplied.

Figure 6. Replica of banner drawn by Ravi, image: Alex Bainbridge for RRAN.

Figure 7. Nauru protest following Omid's death, image: supplied.

Figure 8. Perth protest following Omid's death, image: Ali Raza.

In 2014, Farhad, a political prisoner from Iran, currently interned on Manus Island began taking photographs of messages written on his hand. These would often offer commentary on topical political issues or events including equal marriage rights, responses to incidents of racism in Australia, in addition to expressions of solidarity with other people who have been targeted by the detention regime. In using this communication device, he was able to maintain anonymity whilst drawing upon the symbolism of the hand and reminding people that these messages were coming from a person reaching out to be heard. Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites called for

people to engage with his political acts and submit photos in solidarity with the political prisoners on Manus and Nauru (Figures 9 and 10). They stated, "Through these political statements initiated on Manus Island's illegal prison we will join together with those in Australian black sites to bring this message to all" (RAPBS, 2016). The concept of attempting to help bring the messages emerging from Australia's black sites to the broader community is at the crux of the current role of Australian-based activists.

Figure 9. Farhad, "Political Prisoner Manus," image: supplied.
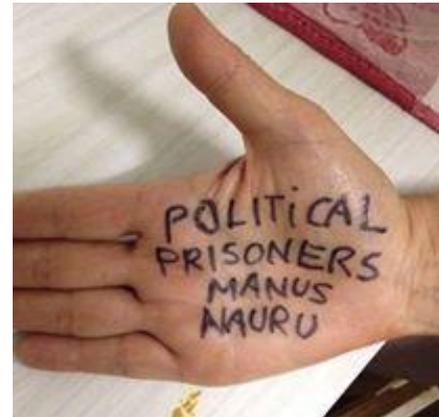
Figure 10. Janet Galbraith, "Political Prisoners Manus Nauru," image: RAPBS.

The rise of mobile communication devices has helped Australia's political prisoners, both in remote or restrictive mainland detention centres and remote sites, penetrate public forums that were previously far less accessible and defy the government's attempt to maintain an information blackout. The development of Facebook and online messaging and calling applications have helped overcome the prohibitive cost of international text and call rates, and systems have been developed by Australian-based activists to ensure that prisoners can maintain access. The ability to have direct contact with people on Manus and Nauru has also drawn more people into the refugee rights campaign, as personal connections have fostered a greater sense of responsibility to act. A lack of direct contact and widespread silencing of voices has been replaced with the increasing personification of what were previously nameless and faceless masses that were easy to characterise as a threat. Despite acknowledging how much better communication links are now than what they were previously, they can be variable across different locations and attempts to sever these connections remain present. Countless examples of prisoners speaking for themselves, however, must help develop an appreciation for the necessary hierarchy of voices. The hopes and aspirations of Australian activists must be acknowledged as secondary to the voices of the communities who are directly affected by and who have experienced the impacts of government policies. Technology has opened up many different opportunities to promote activism from Australia's black sites and detention camps and thus is an important tool for activists working to challenge the detention regime. Activists inside the camps are increasingly able to narrate their own actions, receive acknowledgement and recognition for their work, and increase the visibility of their political acts.

Endnotes

1. In April 2016, Behrouz Boochani, Kurdish journalist and human rights defender, currently incarcerated in the Manus camp labelled himself and his fellow inmates as "political prisoners." The appropriation of this terminology is a deliberate means of challenging the legitimacy of the regime of indefinite detention and the political motivations that drive it. This paper will adopt this reference.

2. The MV Tampa was a Norwegian freighter vessel involved in the rescue of 433 people seeking asylum from sinking en route to Australia from Indonesia (about 140 k.m. from Christmas Island) in August 2001. After people were taken onto the Tampa, it began to head towards Christmas Island; however, permission to enter Australian territorial waters was refused. After a standoff of several days, it was decided that people would be taken to Nauru to have their refugee claims processed (Willheim, 2003, pp. 160-162).

References

Abdile, H 2016, *I Will Rise*, Writing Through Fences, Victoria.

Art Gallery of New South Wales 2015, *The Photograph and Australia: Time Line,* accessed 24 November 2016, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artsets/51b88k.

Boochani, B 2016a, "Australia, Exceptional in its Brutality," *Overland,* accessed 5 November 2016, https://overland.org.au/2016/04/australia-exceptional-in-its-brutality.

---. 2016b, Facebook post, accessed 6 November 2016, https://www.facebook.com/ behrouz.boochani.7/posts/643741965797914.

Briskman, L 2013, "Technology, Control, and Surveillance," *Refuge,* vol. 29, no.1, pp. 11-15.

Cartoonists Rights Network International, 2016, *2016 Courage in Editorial Cartooning Winner Announce,* viewed 10 November 2016, http://cartoonistsrights.org/CP8UG.

Comaroff, J 2007, "Terror and Territory: Guantanamo and the Space of Contradiction," *Public Culture* vol. 19, no.2, pp. 397-398.

Doherty, B 2017, "Eaten Fish, Manus Island's refugee cartoonist, given sanctuary in northern Europe," *The Guardian,* accessed 17 January 2018, https://www. theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/19/eaten-fish-manus-islands-refugee-cartoonist-moves-to-northern-europe.

Fiske, L 2012, *Insider Resistance: Understanding Refugee Protest Against Immigration Detention in Australia, 1999-2005,* Curtin University.

IMDB 2016, "Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time," viewed 15 April 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6229152.

Mansted, R 2007, "The Pacific Solution—Assessing Australia's Compliance with International Law," *Bond University Student Law Review* vol. 3, no.1, pp. 1-2.

National Justice Project 2017, "Federal Court Rules Asylum Seekers Can Keep Mobile Phones in Detention," *National Justice Project News*, accessed 26 October 2017,

https://www.justice.org.au/news/2017317/federal-court-rules-asylum-seekers-can-keep-mobile-phones-in-detention.

PEN International 2015, "PEN Melbourne: Iranian Journalist Behrouz Boochani Tells of the Horrors of Manus Island: Out of Sight, Out of Mind," accessed 10 November 2016, http://www.pen-international.org/centresnews/pen-melbourne-iranian-journalist-behrouz-boochani-tells-of-the-horrors-of-manus-island-out-of-sight-out-of-mind.

Penovic, T 2008, "Mental Harm as an Instrument of Public Policy," *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* vol. 15, no.1, pp. 140-152.

Perera, S 2007, "A Pacific Zone? (In) Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape," in P Kumar Rajaram and C Grundy-Warr (ed.), *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 201-228.

Perera, S and Pugliese, J 2015, "Detainees on Nauru may have been 'Released,' but They are Not Free," *The Conversation,* accessed 10 November 2016, https://theconversation.com/detainees-on-nauru-may-have-been-released-but-they-are-not-free-48648.

---. J 2016, "The Tragedy of Eaten Fish, the Award-Winning Cartoonist on Manus Island," *The Conversation,* accessed 10 November 2016, https://theconversation.com/the-tragedy-of-eaten-fish-the-award-winning-cartoonist-on-manus-island-65150.

Phillips, J and Spinks, H 2013, "Background Note: Immigration detention in Australia," Parliamentary Library, Canberra, accessed 26 October 2017, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/Detention#_Toc351535457.

Phillips, S 2007, "A Brief History of Facebook," *The Guardian*, accessed 5 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia.

Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites 2016, "Political Acts," accessed 24 October 2017, http://rapbs.org/index.php/political-acts.

---. Sites 2017, "What Are Black Sites?", accessed 24 October 2017, http://rapbs.org/index.php/what-are-black-sites.

Tlozek, E 2017, "Manus Island Detention Centre Shot at by PNG Defence Force Members, Detainees Say," *ABC News,* accessed 30 October 2017, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-14/png-police-respond-to-reports-of-shooting-at-manus-is-centre/8445274.

Wheeler Centre 2017, "The Messenger," accessed 23 April 2017, https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/the-messenger.

Willheim, E. "MV Tampa: The Australian Response," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 15 (2003): 159-191.

Writing Through Fences 2017, "About," accessed 10 November 2016, writingthroughfences.org/sample-page.

Michelle Bui is a research assistant in the faculty of Media, Culture and Creative Arts at Curtin University. She is currently involved in a project called *Deathscapes* which seeks new ways to document, understand, and respond to contemporary racialised violence (against Indigenous people and racialised migrants and refugees at the border) in the settler states of Australia, Canada and the United States. Her research work follows a longstanding involvement with the Refugee Rights Action Network (RRAN) WA. Her engagement in political activism has allowed her to work closely with people seeking asylum both in detention and in the community. She regularly visits people detained at the Yongah Hill Immigration Detention Centre and maintains contact with several of Australia's political prisoners, incarcerated on Manus Island and Nauru.