



# The enforcement archipelago: Detention, haunting, and asylum on islands

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## ABSTRACT

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From offshore border enforcement to detention centers on remote islands, struggles over human smuggling, detention, asylum, and associated policies play out along the geographical margins of the nation-state. In this paper, I argue that islands are part of a broader enforcement archipelago of detention, a tactic of migration control. Island enforcement practices deter, detain, and deflect migrants from the shores of sovereign territory. Islands thus function as key sites of territorial struggle where nation-states use distance, invisibility, and sub-national jurisdictional status (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006) to operationalize Ong's (2006) 'graduated zones of sovereignty'. In sites that introduce ambiguity into migrants' legal status, state and non-state actors negotiate and illuminate geopolitical arrangements that structure mobility. This research traces patterns among distant and distinct locations through examination of sovereign and biopolitical powers that haunt asylum-seekers detained on islands. Offshore detention, in turn, fuels spatial strategies employed in onshore detention practices internal to sovereign territory.

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From preemptive patrolling to detention in remote locations, struggles over human smuggling, detention, asylum, and exclusion play out along the margins of nation-states. This paper posits island detentions as one key element of 'the securitization of migration' (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006) – processes through which transnational migrants are increasingly subject to enforcement measures implemented to protect national security. I report one key finding of a larger study: islands emerged as spatially significant sites of exclusion in the geographical landscape where migrants tried to access asylum processes and where nation-states invested significant resources in enforcement to manage entry. I argue that islands prove a key component of a broader enforcement archipelago designed to control migrants deemed out of place, reducing their chances to reach sovereign territory. By detaining migrants on islands, states and third parties hide asylum-seekers from view of media, human rights monitors, and publics at large. As a result, the perspectives of those involved in island encounters – civil servants, migrants, attorneys, and advocates – are underrepresented in contemporary debates on immigration and border enforcement in public discourse and scholarly literatures.

Islands are sites where nation-states exercise power through the management of global migration and sites ripe for investigation of how sovereign and biopolitical power operate offshore. Nation-states exploit legal ambiguity, economic dependency, and partial

forms of citizenship and political status on islands to advance security agendas. In the burgeoning field of island studies, scholars are mapping broad patterns and variations in jurisdiction and governance in order to situate activities on islands (Baldacchino & Milne, 2006). Migration scholars, meanwhile, have identified forms of precariousness encountered by people on the move (e.g., Goldring, Berinstein, & Bernhard, 2009). Here, I bring together these two trends: growth in migrants' precariousness and recognition of islands as sites of creative exercises in power, their many uses documented in the field of nissology (McCall, 1994). The islands discussed are distinct from each other historically, geographically, culturally, economically, and politically. Yet important patterns connect them and fuel examination of geographies of sovereignty.

Islands play key roles in military strategy, resulting in violent colonial histories along with militarized landscapes, such as large naval bases in small territories (Kaplan, 2005; Vine, 2009). These residual material landscapes are sites where past usage haunts present occupants as they often serve as convenient built structures for detention. Now, nation-states are using islands to capture liminal populations, neither home nor arrived, not able to legally become refugees or asylum-seekers because of their location at a distance from sovereign territory. Whether open or closed, publicly or privately managed, officially or unofficially sanctioned, facilities on islands serve the purpose of isolating migrants from communities of advocacy and legal representation, and in some cases from asylum claims processes that can only be accessed by landing on sovereign territory.

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The enforcement practices delineated here mirror historical patterns of work done by nation-states in 'bounded' sites, yet asylum is an issue rarely examined on islands. Identification of the patterns surrounding island detentions will enhance knowledge of migration activities offshore and contemporary debates about sovereignty (e.g., Baldacchino & Milne, 2006; Steinberg, 2005). Data on asylum-seekers in temporal, spatial, and legal limbo between nation-states prompt conceptualization of enforcement practices as the haunting of sovereign and biopolitical powers and the recursive relationship between offshore and onshore detention practices.

Asylum claimant processes differ from programs designed to resettle refugees selected from abroad by governments ('government-assisted refugee resettlement programs'). Whereas the latter involve the selection of refugees for resettlement by authorities working in concert with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the former travel without government sanction or assistance. Asylum-seekers often employ human smugglers and cross multiple borders in order to reach sovereign territory of nation-states with asylum claimant systems (Nadig, 2002). Migrants proceed in clandestine fashion in order to elude authorities en route to a destination where they can make a claim. Consequently, those detected en route become associated not with asylum, but criminality.

Those countries with the largest per capita refugee resettlement programs – Australia, Canada, and the United States – also exercise the most advanced 'front-end' border enforcement strategies to inhibit what policymakers refer to as 'spontaneous arrivals,' those who arrive to make a claim for protection without having been selected or assisted by governments. These wealthy resettlement states of the global North prefer to exercise choice in the resettlement of refugees, and believe the managed process of refugee selection to be – alongside border enforcement – "the right to sovereign assertion," as one Australian immigration official explained (Interview, Canberra, April 2006). The displacement that causes asylum-seeking thus involves struggles over the respective agency, resources, and resourcefulness of migrants and authorities. These struggles transpire in the context of asymmetrical geopolitical fields where authorities and asylum-seekers find themselves intertwined spatially, legally, and materially. States fulfill competing mandates to enforce borders and provide protection for those displaced, and migrants face these contradictions during their transnational journeys. These encounters and negotiations are acutely visible through the enforcement practices in the peripheral yet strategic zones of sovereignty where migrants are detained on islands. As Arendt (1958) and Agamben (1998) both argued, exclusion of non-citizens has always been central to exercises in sovereign power.

In addition to establishing that islands are sites where nation-states exploit isolation to control migration, I analyze *why* this archipelago of exclusion has taken shape. As the pace of human migration intensified and public opinion turned against asylum-seekers throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, states displaced border enforcement internally and externally (Bigo, 2000; Coleman, 2007). In both cases, policing entered the intimacies of daily life. Detention offshore exemplifies one manifestation of this process, where the bodies and identities of asylum-seekers are contained and regulated in the name of border enforcement, national security, and geopolitical imperatives. Through these processes, people on the move are haunted. Sociologists have primarily applied the concept of haunting where the sociological imagination demarcates oppressive practices carried out in daily life (e.g., Cho, 2009; Gordon, 2008). Here, haunting does geographical work that reveals dimensions of sovereign power enacted offshore, well beyond mainland territory. Haunting does important analytical work because it captures the mobility of

sovereign power as borders are relocated amid the residue of militarized landscapes. Past haunts present and detention practices offshore – in turn – haunt detainees onshore. Haunting thus offers a way of understanding state violence even where the state may appear absent.

I proceed as follows. After discussion of methods, the third section frames understandings of power operating on islands with discussion of legality, securitization, and enforcement. The fourth section elaborates on the concept of haunting. The fifth section lays the groundwork for mapping islands as enforcement archipelago, addressing distinctions and shared characteristics of islands under study. The sixth section offers findings on islands in order to situate detention in relation to enforcement and displacement. The concluding section revisits the concept of haunting and its implications for research on the political geography of islands.

## On methods

Quantitative data on potential asylum-seekers in detention offshore are not readily available, and often acquired in pieces rather than comprehensive statistical portraits. Researchers often secure information about detention through access to information requests, interviews, and even media accounts. With a dearth of quantitative data, qualitative data offer information beyond numbers about offshore border enforcement and detention in sites under study.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008 on shifting enforcement strategies of nation-states as they moved offshore to police borders beyond mainland territories. There is an important distinction to make when discussing information about enforcement between official and unofficial realms of knowledge, between policy recorded on paper and daily practice. Many of the empirical phenomena detailed in this paper fall under the category of *practice*. Attention to this field of practice resonates with Avery Gordon and Grace Cho's engagement with haunting. For Gordon, haunting functions in daily life where oppressive forces are assumed to be historically "over-and-done-with" (2008: xvi). Cho (2009) focuses on haunting in the form of silence among women in the Korean diaspora displaced by war, the unspoken a response to oppression.

Similarly, practices detailed here are often not found in the pages of policy, but in remote field locations hidden from view where authorities carry out work beyond the purview of media, advocates, or human rights monitors. Often, a geographical narrative, such as proximity to interception, stands in as a rationale for remote detention. The countries under study are signatories to the *Convention*, yet some of the practices of civil servants who patrol borders are not written into the texts or corresponding geographies of either domestic or international law. This study therefore draws insight from scholars on daily state practices operating beyond the texts of policy (e.g., Das and Poole 2004; Gupta and Sharma 2006; Painter, 2006).

The project began with the goal of studying offshore border enforcement that precluded the arrival of asylum-seekers on sovereign territory. Earlier research on detention and the refugee determination process in Canada had revealed a community of nation-states that Canadian bureaucrats studied for "best practices." After research in Canada, I went on to examine enforcement practices undertaken by those nation-states that served as peers with comparable border enforcement practices: Australia, the United States (US), and member states of the European Union (EU).

The project involved semi-structured interviews with governmental and non-governmental institutional employees, detainees, former detainees, attorneys, authorities, journalists, and advocates. Fieldwork also included participant-observation in the form of

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