Hope, Solidarity and Death at the Australian Border:

Christmas Island and Asylum Seekers

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To those who wanted to feel safe in this world, to experience freedom and hoped they would be welcomed at the border. In solidarity, we acknowledge your journeys and plights as you crossed the seas.

To those who lost loved ones in the ocean, please know that those who passed will always be remembered and honoured for their courage and strength.

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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
APOD	Alternative Place of Detention
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
UAM	unaccompanied minor
UCIW	Union of Christmas Island Workers
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VMR	Voluntary Marine Rescue
WCG	Walter Construction Group

FOREWORD

The UN estimates that from 2014 to 2020 roughly twenty thousand asylum seekers and migrants went missing at sea trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe. Since 2000, nearly two thousand people have died at sea trying to reach Australia. In 2015, when a young Syrian boy named Alan Kurdi was photographed lying dead and face down on a Turkish beach, the world was gutted, and donations to refugee funds grew exponentially overnight. It is a quirk of human nature that we are inspired to act by a single tragedy, while, paradoxically, larger-scale human suffering registers only as abstraction. Numbers and analytics are necessary to help us understand the magnitude of a crisis, but they have a way of dulling the human dimension to tragedy, and therefore our response to it. But it's vital to remember that each one of the roughly twenty thousand people gone missing at sea was once a father, a mother, a son, a daughter; each a unique and irreplaceable human being with a history, and with specific dreams, hopes and fears.

In June 2018 I travelled to Sicily with the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR to meet asylum seekers who had made the Mediterranean crossing. I wanted to better understand who they were and how they had arrived at such a seemingly reckless decision to board overcrowded, flimsy rubber boats and take on the sea. Halfway through the mission I boarded the *Luigi Dattilo*, the second-largest ship in the Italian Coastguard, docked in Catania, Sicily. The ship has conducted over one hundred search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, and in the process rescued some forty thousand stranded asylum seekers and migrants from drowning. The captain invited me to the briefing room to watch a ten-minute video of a typical mission.

Let me say that I will never forget what I saw.

I could hardly breathe through the brief video. I saw capsized rubber boats, each a tiny dot in a roiling sea of blue. I saw men, women and children in orange lifejackets flailing in the water, eyes wide with the fear of death. They were sunburned, exhausted, foaming at the mouth and barely hanging on. Their faces wore the same shocked expression. When the families were rescued I saw how badly their feet were burned from exposure to salt and sunlight and the toxic fuels that leak and pool ankle-high inside the rubber boats.

It was enough to make me wonder aloud why anyone would undertake this journey across the Mediterranean. Why would you choose to leave your home, your land, your community, your possessions, your friends, your

roots, all the scaffoldings of your existence, and head for the sea, knowing how dangerous the journey is even before you get on a boat? Asylum seekers who take the Eastern Mediterranean route often board smugglers' boats operating out of Libya – where criminal networks run rampant and prey on the vulnerable. There are too many stories of asylum seekers – especially unaccompanied minors – being abducted by these groups, held for ransom, sold into forced labour, extorted, tortured, beaten and, in the case of girls, sexually assaulted.

Why would you risk this? Why would you spend your life savings to put your loved ones, the people your cherish the most on earth, aboard an unsafe, overcrowded boat, fully aware of how thousands of people have died trying this very journey before you? Why would you set out in the open sea, perhaps for days, with little food or water, the risk of capsizing looming with every breath, your life in the hands of unscrupulous smugglers who have no regard for human life, who are at times openly murderous, and whose whole business model benefits from human strife and suffering? It's appalling. What person in their right mind would choose this for themselves, for their family?

In search of answers, I spoke to asylum seekers who had made the sea crossing.

At a reception centre in a small town in Sicily I met Khadija, a divorced thirty-one-year-old Afghan mother of two young boys who had been lodging there for a month, waiting for asylum alongside her boys and elderly mother. Khadija owned and ran a co-ed gymnasium in Kabul. It was the work of her life and she was fiercely proud of what she had built. But the Taliban kept harassing her and insisting she close the gym. Khadija received numerous death threats. She had to disguise herself and take a different route to work each day. The Taliban's harassment continued but Khadija is an independent woman and a born entrepreneur. She couldn't bring herself to abandon the life she had worked so hard to build. And above all she loved Kabul. It was her home, where she'd learned to walk and talk, where her children were born. Then one day men broke into her home, ransacked it and, finding that she was not home, beat her father to death.

That was the final straw for Khadija. Distraught and wracked with grief, she drained her savings, packed a pair of suitcases, took her boys and elderly mother and fled to Turkey, from where she hoped to cross the sea to Italy to eventually reunite with family members in Switzerland. She was warned there that her odds of survival were poor. Still Khadija paid smugglers an exorbitant amount and tried the crossing. When the first crossing was aborted shortly after setting sail, she had to pay again. At last the four of them found themselves on a small, crowded boat, with twenty-three other

people and little food or water.

When she described the eight terrifying days at sea, tears pooled in her eyes and her voice cracked. It's important to remember that Afghanistan is a landlocked country where most people don't know how to swim. There is virtually no Afghan water culture. Listening to her, I pictured the pitch-black moonless nights, waves as high as walls all around the rickety boat, seawater lashing at Khadija's skin, her mother praying, her boys terrified. I marvelled at the despair that had forced her into this choice.

Still, although Khadija and her family eventually washed up on the Sicilian coast, hungry, exhausted and traumatised, they were among the fortunate. Thousands of other asylum seekers and migrants have died trying similar journeys.

There is a beautiful little cemetery in Catania on the eastern coast of Sicily. It is clean and fenced in. The grounds are well manicured. The paths between the tall granite headstones are swept clean and the neat rows of trimmed rosebushes have been well watered. On any given day you can spot families depositing flowers and paying respects to departed loves ones.

By way of one of those accidental metaphors that life occasionally serves up, there is another cemetery next door. I walked through it that June of 2018, joined by an imam from a local mosque in Catania. In this cemetery I saw no flowers, no bushes, no chiselled marble and no clean, well-swept paths. The graves there were unmarked. They were neglected mounds of withered grass, covered with weeds and bits of trash: sun-warped plastic soda bottles, crumbled up chewing-gum packs, a pigeon carcass at the foot of a grave, bees swarming inside its open chest.

Beneath my feet, under those unkempt mounds, lay the remains of refugee and migrant families who had perished in the Mediterranean. The imam told me that most of the bodies were too ravaged for fingerprinting. Their names were lost and their histories gone, swallowed forever by the sea, each reduced now to a plot number, a municipality code, and a letter to mark the gender. The imam said that because religious affiliation could not be determined, he and a Catholic priest both recited verses from their respective scriptures as the bodies were buried.

'They came looking for a more dignified life,' he said quietly. 'We could not even give them a dignified burial.'

There are 82.4 million displaced people around the world, over 26 million of them refugees. Immigration is a complex and emotionally charged issue. And it is one that has become heavily politicised, particularly in the West, by so-called populist regimes that have scored political victories painting displaced people as either criminals or opportunists intent on stealing Western jobs and taking advantage of Western social-aid programs. This is

of course a grotesque mischaracterisation of why ordinary people choose to leave home and risk their lives attempting perilous treks across the sea. It does not take into account how agonising it is for people to leave home, how long they postpone the decision hoping something might change. It does not reflect the reality that often the decision to leave home is based on the stark, existential choice between life and death. As the poet Warson Shire says:

> no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying –
> leave,
> run away from me now,
> I don't know what I've become
> but I know that anywhere is safer than here.

It is true that some people are escaping crushing poverty and come looking for work or education and better opportunities, and, as such, may not need international protection. But many are running from the horrors poignantly described by Shire: armed conflict, insecurity, unfathomable human-rights violations and gender-based violence. Many run because of religious, ethnic and political persecution, or persecution due to sexual orientation. These groups are legally entitled to international protection because they no longer have the protection of their governments and can't safely go home. They should be treated with compassion and dignity and have their human rights respected. They deserve better than scorn, rejection and open-ended detention.

I am grateful to Dr Dimasi for writing this book and highlighting the plight of asylum seekers trying to reach Australian shores. She chronicles the fascinating story of Christmas Island and the unique and sometimes surprising dynamics between islanders and the asylum seekers arriving by boat. The story of Christmas Island and its place in Australia's problematic and contentious asylum policy is a compelling one, revealing the contrasting and shifting ways in which the islanders have responded to asylum seekers, and how both islanders and asylum seekers have been fundamentally altered after the fact. The story tells us a lot about the current state of global displacement and how governments and ordinary people respond to asylum seekers. Mostly, I am grateful to Dr Dimasi for advocating for asylum seekers in similar predicaments as Khadija, and for border policies that are sensible, pragmatic, and humane – policies based on compassion and solidarity with ordinary people resorting to desperate measures to find safety, hope and a chance at a more secure, dignified life.

Khaled Hosseini
July 2021

CHAPTER ONE

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 off Christmas Island. Media footage showed not only asylum seeker's bodies floating in the water but also islanders witnessing the horror first hand. Fifty asylum seekers drowned, forty-two 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 it is important as it provides insight into why humans respond to strangers in need, or why at times they do not.

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 the millions of displaced people globally make the perilous journey across the Indian Ocean. From 2008 to late 2011 more than fourteen

thousand asylum seekers arrived by boat in Australian waters, with most transiting through Indonesia and subsequently being detained on Christmas Island.

While the Christmas Island community has experienced asylum-seeker boat arrivals for nearly twenty 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 two thousand 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 Settlements 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 ten years later. A colonial system operated from settlement to the early 1980s, with Asian workers paid minimum wages and segregated from the 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 from one of the 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 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 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 by the island administrator. Local government consists of the Shire of Christmas Island (SOCI), 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 (1991–6) 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. ACM was replaced by Global Solutions Limited (GSL) in 2004, 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. After 1992 islanders 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 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 in 1999 of temporary protection visas (TPVs) by the Howard Liberal government (1996–2007), 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, wherein 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 the 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 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 leadup to the election. The first was the sinking of the SIEV X, whose 353 asylum seekers drowned en route to Australia in the Sunda Strait, Indonesia.[9] The acronym refers to Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, and, as the boat never arrived, it was referred to as 'X'. 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, had 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.

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 eight-hundred-person capacity, complete with electric fences, microwave sensors and lockdown 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 the Christmas Island detention facilities lay empty and it seemed unlikely that 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 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 December 31, 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.

Impetus for Exploring Christmas Island and Asylum Seekers

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 northwest side. Standing on the hill, I observed NWP. It was a perplexing experience to pass through the sleepy township and 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 packed with asylum seekers sailing into Christmas Island's Flying Fish Cove. One 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 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 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, and it 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 arrangements and 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. The work of two academics – Simone Dennis and Peter Chambers – emerged over the course of my writing, yet neither specifically explores the Christmas Island asylum-seeker host community. Dennis's work is located within the discipline of anthropology. Christmas Island's unique natural environment led him to explore how islanders relate to the animal world and the production of

movement, sensuality and locality.[22] Dennis discusses 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's 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 research sets out to do.

While there have been a number of academic studies into Australia's asylum-seeker policy, including the use of Christmas Island as a space for detention, 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, subsequently being 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 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, from 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 boat 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 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 'span those boundaries' by studying host communities and asylum seekers, which my research into the Christmas Island host community also aims 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]; and 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 Alternative Place of Detention (APOD) facility, and Port Augusta (South Australia) and the 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 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 the 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 among 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]

This 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 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' and amounts 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 Rupar'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 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 must 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 research 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 research. 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. I have explored these responses to policy further where they provide further insight into local responses to asylum seekers.

This research tracks islander responses from 1992 to 2011 and 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 on the island, 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.

Mapping the Christmas Island Story

As Christmas Island was once uninhabited, chapter two addresses the historical formation of the Christmas Island community and key events. From 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 the issue.

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.[59]

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 Island. Tanji's 'community of protest' is also applied in light of islanders' responses to the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*.[60]

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 a 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.[61]

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.[62]

The construction and emplacement of NWP from 2002 to 2008 and the 'border economy' are the subjects of chapter eight.[63] 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 are highlighted. With the change of government in 2007, the shift in Australia's asylum-seeker policy and the opening of NWP revealed 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 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.[64]

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.[65]

Chapter eleven summarises the fluctuating nature of Christmas Islander responses to asylum seekers from 1992 to 2011, the ebb-and-flow nature of the island, and how islanders are caught up in political 'storms' on asylum seekers, border security and now the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines future possibilities beyond this project. Finally, I argue that deaths at the border must end and be replaced with hope and solidarity, especially as asylum-seeker suffering is compounded by the global pandemic.