

**Julia Caroline Morris (2023). *Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru*. Cornell University Press. 318pp. 26 b&w halftones, 1 map, 1 diagram. ISBN-13: 978-1-5017-6584-1. hbk US\$72.95; e-book US\$50.99.**

In 2001, the Norwegian merchant vessel *MV Tampa* was refused entry to Australian waters because it was carrying 433 passengers, most of whom were fleeing Afghanistan, seeking asylum. The decision was taken by the then right-wing government of Australia, who were facing an impending election, which they subsequently won. The electoral lesson was unequivocal and, more than two decades later, is instantly recognisable: anti-immigrant policies are a vote winner. Having realised this, the Australian government needed to find somewhere else to take the roughly 3,000 asylum seekers arriving on its shores at the time. They rang Rene Harris, then President of the Republic of Nauru. A ‘Pacific Solution’ called ‘Offshore Refugee Processing’ was born.

*Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru* is an ethnographic account of an island economy based on extensive fieldwork on Nauru in 2015, as well as research in Fiji, Australia, and the UK. It traces continuity and change, from the colonial period and the beginnings of the phosphate industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the halcyon days of the post-colonial mining boom when the island had some of the highest GDP per capita ratios on earth, to the bust when phosphate was exhausted, and the birth and consolidation of offshore processing as an economic substitute. It is a fascinating tale, elegantly told.

The book has seven chapters. The Introduction sets the scene and situates the work primarily in the field of critical migration studies, but with a nod to post-colonial theory and political economy analysis. Chapter One is about phosphate, the mining of which defined the colonisation of the island. This story has been told elsewhere but is brought to life vividly again here. Chapter Two juxtaposes an economy built on mining with one built on refugees by employing the metaphor of a ‘company town’, which renders the otherwise exotic island nation instantly recognisable, with striking parallels across time and space. Chapter Three tells the story of how the ‘Offshore Industry’ came to be and provides insights into who benefits from its existence. Chapter Four uncovers the frictions that this form of ‘enclave’ capitalism creates. In short, prejudice and protest abound on all sides. The actors involved face paradoxes and moral quandaries at every turn. Nobody is happy. Everyone wants to go to Australia—even if just to shop—but the Australians do not want them and are prepared to waste enormous sums ‘securing’ their borders against their possible arrival. Chapter Five focuses on the idea of a multicultural Nauru, which is supposed to be a hopeful account of the circumstances these actors find themselves in, but which is revealed to be a facade. Chapter Six carries the title ‘Bitter Money’, which captures a key theme of the book that ties past to present.

*Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru* typifies all the inherent strengths and weaknesses of a masterfully written ethnographic account. Each chapter starts with a vignette drawing on a cast of Nauruan interlocutors who unlock a key paradox or dilemma they face living on contemporary Nauru. These dilemmas are then unpacked by reference to a range of qualitative, historical, publicly available, and academic sources. I especially appreciated the willingness to draw comparisons between Nauru and scholarly works from other parts of the world, which helped to situate the specific context in a broader story about the pernicious effects of extractive capitalism. There are lots of helpful photographs and the text is alive with quotes. All of this makes it an entertaining and informative read.

The book leaves the reader with the overriding impression that we are all trapped, literally on Nauru in the case of its primary subjects, but within the globalised economy that Morris reveals for the rest of us. The migrants seeking refugee status are trapped in their ‘processing’ camp (where the food and services are better than those available for the rest of the population) but then, when released into the community, their desire to relocate to Australia leads them to resent the island and fear Nauruans. The Australia contractors are trapped by their racism, misogyny, and high salaries, which form a gilded neo-imperial cage reminiscent of the old British Phosphate Commission. The Nauruans are trapped by the lack of alternative economic options, reliance on their old coloniser, and fear that the refugee tap will be turned off, just like phosphate before it. The tragedy is that nobody—except the anthropologist!—can see that all plans for escape are a mirage. Everywhere is becoming Nauru as the island is emblematic of the processes that constitute globalised extractive capitalism and its ecological effects.

There are so many important and interesting themes contained in the chapters that it was sometimes difficult to know what the main argument is. The book starts with the idea that it is “following a commodity from the point of extraction” (p. 6) and concludes with the “tremendous amount of work that goes into the legal production of ‘making someone’ into a refugee” (p. 242). Its success is best measured against this latter aim, which I take to be the main contribution. Along the way it does so much more that it is easy to get lost. Yet, sadly for readers of *Small States & Territories*, it pays very little attention to the core themes and texts of this journal. Scale and sovereignty are peripheral. The notion of ‘enclave’ gets a brief mention, but it does not do the conceptual work that it could. This is a shame because these ideas might have provided the text with a greater sense of agency and optimism.

Still, these stylistic choices should not detract from the main value, which is to shed important light on an understudied consequence of the way colonial legacies, the effects of resource extraction, fear of migration, and the (dis)economies of scale interact over time. *Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru* deserves to be widely read and appreciated.

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