

NAURU PRISON THEORY AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

DISPLACEMENT, EXILE,
AND CREATIVE RESISTANCE
AGAINST BORDER VIOLENCE

by Omid Tofghian and Elahe Zivardar

Historical Background

Omid: In 1992 the Australian Labor government (social democrat) led by Paul Keating introduced mandatory indefinite detention. This new phase of Australian border politics was continued and expanded under subsequent Labor and Liberal governments. Radical securitization and militarization of Australia's border-industrial complex took place in 2001 under John Howard's Liberal/National Coalition government (conservative). The so-called 'Pacific Solution' began. In a move that reflected previous acts of colonial domination and border violence, people seeking asylum by boat were arbitrarily sent to refugee prisons (officially named 'regional processing centres') in the Republic of Nauru (a former protectorate) and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (a former colony): Nauru for incarcerating women, unaccompanied minors and families, Manus Island for incarcerating men travelling alone. These carceral-border sites were built, managed, maintained, and expanded by numerous private multinational companies, many of them with disturbing connections to military and prison industries, and histories of abuse and corruption.

In 2012 and 2013, several thousand people seeking asylum by boat were exiled offshore to Nauru and Manus Island in what was the second phase of the Pacific Solution (later became Operation Sovereign Borders). The Manus prison camp was eventually closed after several years, but a significant number of refugees once held there are still stranded in the PNG capital, Port Moresby. Nauru remains open. The number of refugees incarcerated on the two islands had been decreasing slowly over the past ten years for many reasons: mainly dragged out third country resettlement initiatives, medical evacuations to Australia for urgent treatment, deportations, and deaths. In 2023 new groups of people seeking asylum in Australia were sent to Nauru after the last of the previous refugees had all left immigration detention. Over the past few years a large number of the refugees evacuated from offshore detention centres and transferred to Australia for medical treatment were re-imprisoned on the mainland. Many were recently released, but most of them still have no pathway to protection and safety in a third country.

The Howard government began the first phase of the Pacific Solution (first phase 2001-2007; second phase

2012-2013; Operation Sovereign Borders 2013 and ongoing), but Julia Gillard's Labor government initiated the second phase by reopening the prison camps, after they were closed under her predecessor Kevin Rudd, and began banishing refugees again. However, Rudd continued this border regime when he returned to power soon after; he also created new laws denying the people who arrived after 19 July 2013 the chance of ever resettling in Australia. Since its inception, Australia's policy of mandatory indefinite detention of people seeking asylum has had bipartisan support and has been grossly exploited for political gain during elections; various periods in contemporary Australian politics have witnessed how both political parties compete to reinforce and expand draconian and racist border policies with the support of the mainstream media, and with few major legal or constitutional obstacles.

This paper is in the form of what I have called a *shared philosophical activity*. Elahe Zivardar and I discuss our understanding of this notion and our experiences engaging in it. We also reflect on the kind of philosophy produced in these interactions which foregrounds the work of incarcerated refugees or those recently released; we critically approach related themes and topics, initiate new possibilities for engaging with border violence in philosophically transformative ways, and consider the potential of these approaches for philosophical discovery. We also address significant issues regarding knowledge production in extreme situations such as indefinite detention.

SHARED PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT INDICATES THAT THERE ARE LARGER STORIES TO THE CREATION OF OUR COLLABORATIVE WORKS

My activism in support of displaced and exiled peoples began twenty-five years ago, before the first phase of

the Pacific Solution. My own experience of displacement and exile from childhood (and throughout my life hearing about the experiences of family and friends around the world) has informed my scholar-activist work, especially the collaborations I have been involved in over the last eight years. During this most recent period, I have been translating, co-writing, facilitating publications, consulting, supporting writing and art projects, organizing politically, and more.

I have engaged with all of these not individually, but as a shared philosophical activity. I describe the significance of this briefly in my translator's note to Behrouz Boochani's 2018 book, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, and related articles, interviews, talks and seminars. While editing and translating the many rough text messages that made up the book, Behrouz and I had daily conversations. This shared philosophical activity, together with other examples of our creative resistance, helped form what we refer to as Manus Prison Theory – similar collaborative projects produced with Zivardar and explored in this paper have developed into Nauru Prison Theory. The writing and translation processes for *No Friend but the Mountains* were co-creative in many ways; one example is the discussions and debates that took place, not just with Behrouz but also with the translation consultants Moones Mansoubi (a community and cultural development worker who collected most of the text messages and is Behrouz's first translator) and Sajad Kabgani (who is a researcher specialising in literature, education, psychoanalysis and posthumanism). I worked with both during the process and, like I did with Behrouz, we had philosophical conversations that would sometimes last hours and focus on just one word or concept, one sentence or one passage. There were other people we interacted with and received feedback from, but this core team was vital to the creation, development and formation of the book, and its central messages and layers of meaning. We were all working towards the same goal and thinking about the project in very similar ways. Our individual preparations, contributions and ruminations would combine harmoniously when we met, our individual input validated and enhanced the contributions of other collaborators in uncanny ways; this occurred whenever I met with each one to work on the book and only grew and strengthened as we continued working. It was almost like we were one identity, many bodies.

Shared philosophical activity is important because it indicates that there are larger stories and complex and wide-ranging philosophical backdrops to the creation of our collaborative works. One may consider shared philosophical activity as a sort of frame narrative encompassing the main narratives being presented in the individual projects. The collaborative dynamics and futures are open-ended. Everyone who is drawn in and supports us, everyone who offers feedback, promotes the work, becomes active in the plight, and joins the campaigns, has the potential to become an integral part of this shared philosophical activity.

Elahe: My collaboration with Omid began when he was working on a special issue of the journal *Southerly*. The issue was dedicated to writing and art by people who were incarcerated at the time of writing or formerly incarcerated in Australia's onshore and offshore detention system (Manus Island/Port Moresby in PNG, Nauru, Christmas Island and the Australian mainland), and also people held in Australian-funded refugee prisons in Indonesia. The scope of the contributions spanned a nine-year period. Since that initiative, I continued to collaborate with Omid on writing and arts projects, including my upcoming film *Architect* and our co-curated art exhibition at the UTS Data Arena (working title: *Weapons of Slow Destruction*, developed with the UTS Data Arena team).

Working with Omid was the pinnacle of my collaborations, creating significant and influential platforms for me as an activist and creative. He has decades of experience in both scholarly activism, and social and cultural activism for refugee rights. It is important that he travelled to Manus Island



many times (he was eventually blacklisted, refused entry, and deported as a result of his work) and has extensive knowledge about Australia's onshore and offshore detention industry, especially in PNG. We have a shared commitment and share a plurality of perspectives. It is important that we collaborate in this way since we often encounter a lack of long-term support and commitment, and it is also difficult to find collaborators in this particular space with suitable and enriching perspectives and experiences. Our creative works and academic activities benefit greatly when we provide input together and fuse our perspectives to create results. This collaborative approach is vital for raising awareness, exposing a corrupt and cruel system, and helping to destabilise the system – one designed for oppression, domination and submission.

THE SHARED PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY IS THE POINT WHERE OUR BLIND SPOTS ARE EXPOSED, AND NEW WAYS FORWARD ARE IMAGINED... AND OFTEN REALISED

The process of our co-creation itself involves reciprocal teaching and learning, and is continually evolving. Critically analyzing and reviewing the realities of torture in indefinite detention and the personal stories that we witnessed or heard, we discuss and share our experiences and ideas during many sessions. This allows us to achieve a wider and clearer vision. Our collaboration fuses different perspectives on important points pertaining to border violence and related issues in the world, especially when the topic involves a web of complicated features and factors. When we are both wholly invested in a project, and our lives are committed to dealing with common problems and issues, we are able to merge our skills, experiences, ideas and contributions in profound, productive and uncanny ways; the shared philosophical activity is the point where our blind spots are exposed, and new ways forward are imagined... and often realised.



Shared philosophical activity is not only valuable because of the intellectual discoveries it fosters or the aesthetic outputs it helps create, it is also valuable because it can contribute to political action, and emotional and mental well-being – especially in extreme situations.

Philosophy produced in collaboration with incarcerated refugees

Omid: A number of examples from the creative, analytical and political work produced by people incarcerated in Australia's refugee detention industry has transformed into a profound, embodied, embedded and uniquely collaborative form of public philosophy. The collective and creative resistance I have been involved in has elevated the various forms of artistic and intellectual political acts from within the prison camps into novel instances of philosophical discovery. These collective philosophical projects also function as a nexus for various kinds of philosophical analysis and action by researchers and activists.

The collaborative work I have been doing with displaced and exiled peoples reflects a model of doing public philosophy that has not been explored sufficiently: philosophy produced in collaboration with non-specialist individuals and audiences.

It involves both philosophers and non-specialists working together to identify the philosophical potency of artistic, cultural and advocacy work, including their questions and concerns. Following this initial stage, it also entails co-creating philosophical work, and working together to arrive at philosophical discovery by collaborating on scholarship (traditional scholarly and non-traditional scholarly writing and forms of academic and public engagement). In addition, a shared philosophical activity also entails people formally trained in philosophy and non-specialists creating new collaborative artistic and cultural productions with philosophical resonance, exploring new collective forms of doing philosophy, and introducing new co-devised philosophical questions, concerns, terminology, theories, and critiques.

The collaborations I have been part of have been with people incarcerated in (or recently released from) Australia's carceral-border archipelago (Manus Island/Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Nauru, Christmas Island and the Australian mainland, and Indonesia). The shared philosophical activity is initiated, developed and managed using smart phones (most refugees had to smuggle them into the detention centre), primarily through WhatsApp and Zoom. For those who have been released from detention, this also involves other forms of technology. Throughout all our projects, the collaborators were either held in indefinite detention or have been recently released and are experiencing new forms of discrimination and difficulty.

My original hope for the collaborative literary, scholarly, artistic and activist work was to challenge and dismantle the border-industrial complex. As a result of this collective and creative resistance involving people subject to border violence as epistemic agents, and intellectual and creative leaders, we have created new knowledges pertaining to displacement and exile. That is, we have created philosophies of resistance about border violence that centre the experiences, visions and struggle of people subject to Australia's border regime, and other people subjected to such experiences, globally. I knew from the start that this work would have historical, political and philosophical impact. But the response has been mixed and infrequent, which has made it difficult to gain momentum; I was heartened by the depth and breadth of the reception from some artists and scholars, but these positive experiences occurred only during certain times and for particular projects.

Border Violence and the Potential for Philosophical Work

Elah: In developing my work as an artist and architect, I have been influenced by different knowledge systems since my early teenage years. In addition to my other academic and creative interests, philosophy has fostered in me an important and compelling curiosity. It was instrumental in my life and drove me to explore extremely challenging pathways. My first academic interaction with philosophy was in 2011, during my undergraduate studies in architecture at an Iranian

university. There, I learned many new philosophical ideas in courses such as "The Theoretical Fundamentals of Architecture", "Human Nature and Architecture", and "Introduction to Contemporary Architecture". But true philosophical discovery does not always appear in conference rooms. Likewise, it is not always playing hide and seek with us in libraries. It is also out there, within our societies.

In 2012, I had to submit my final design in order to graduate from university. Inspired by the great archeological heritage of my homeland, I wanted to design buildings with new functions based on, and in harmony with, our needs as civilized human beings living in the 21st century. At the time, I was living in a society where almost everyone was suffering from stress and anxiety. In Iran, as in many parts of the world today, ordinary people have increasingly become victims of war, injustice, and oppression. I asked myself: *how might architecture respond to help society recover from this damage and trauma and to improve the public's mental well-being?*

HOW MIGHT ARCHITECTURE RESPOND TO HELP SOCIETY RECOVER FROM THIS DAMAGE AND TRAUMA AND TO IMPROVE THE PUBLIC'S MENTAL WELL-BEING?

Influenced by many of the profound principles in Iranian architecture, and inspired by modern psychology, I started researching people's mental and spiritual needs, regardless of where they live or what they believe. I began by interviewing almost 500 people between the ages of 18 to 60; the result being what I proposed as an "Abode for Serenity" (*ārāmsāyesh gāh* in Persian/Farsi – this Persian neologism was suggested to me by the late Iranian novelist and journalist Abbas Maroufi, and this was then translated into English by Omid).

By designing the Abode for Serenity, I was naively dreaming of contributing to a peaceful and happy

world. But soon after, I found myself suffering inside a human-built hell as I became a prisoner in one of the world's most horrific and surreal prisons. In 2013, a year after graduating from university, I was forced to flee my country and seek asylum in Australia. Instead of receiving safety, I was exiled by the Australian government to the remote and impoverished Pacific island nation of Nauru and held there for six years.

I left home alone, and suddenly I found myself in a place where nothing was familiar. A huge part of our identity depends on the people around us. I was my parent's daughter, my sibling's sister, a friend for my friends, a colleague for my co-workers, a student for my teachers and then... I was no one. A nonperson. So, who was I?

It felt like I was reincarnated in my own body, with my own memories and emotions – but in another universe. I had to stand and push back all those spears of hatred from a system that targeted my dignity and identity, a system that was meant to break our spirits and create something else in us. These feelings and reflections are the basis for my painting 'Amethyst', part of the *Border-Industrial Complex* series.

I chose to adopt the perspective that best allowed me to look at everything from a powerful point of view; I tried to empower myself even if I was in an isolated prison, on an isolated island. It has been eleven years since I left home and, even though I have been through a lot, the pain of loss is the strongest form of suffering that I am dealing with. Ironically, when I was

incarcerated, carrying such extreme pain associated with loss somehow acted like a painkiller for tolerating the realities of the prison.

THERE HAVE BEEN GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND TECHNOLOGY BUT THE DISCOVERIES ARE OFTEN WEAPONISED AND USED AGAINST HUMANITY

My belief in the ideals of democracy and human rights as expressed by liberal democracies like Australia led me to be imprisoned in Nauru for six years, which has changed and reshaped my beliefs. Now, after eleven years, when I look back it seems that I have been wandering the earth and constantly searching within myself. The more I wander, the more interactions I have, the deeper I dig, and the more I find. Every day I learn more about the world that I am living in. There have been great achievements in, for instance, social sciences, philosophy, psychology, and technology but the discoveries are often weaponised and used against humanity. Psychological abuse such as gaslighting and narcissistic control, for example, act as tools of punishment and reprimand.

Now that I have been released from the island prison, my encounter with the world has led to new understandings. My horrific and surreal experiences have given me the capacity to compare our world before and after my detention. The period that I was detained in Nauru (2013 to 2019) was significant in terms of technological advances. While detained, we could never imagine how the world outside the island was changing. I believe I now have, ironically, a valuable and unique perspective. I can see things that many cannot see because, for most people, change occurred slowly and over a whole decade. It did not take long for me to



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realise what was missing in a world where technology had advanced at a rapid pace and with far-reaching impact – the world according to me after leaving the island prison. After living in purgatory for so long, I now find myself at a new threshold in my life.

Many issues have impacted me: the power of social media and new forms of manipulation; the discourse and debates around cancel culture, freedom of speech and censorship; the dangerous provocation of vulnerable and marginalized people and groups by those in power and the media; technologies aiming to control people's minds, movements and actions; and the spread of more division, competition and hatred. How can I determine the truth, how can I identify falsehood? In which direction are arguments and actions going? I encounter so many contradictions, paradoxes, and absurdities.

I used to think that I was suffering from a serious identity crisis after years of dehumanisation; however, I found out that something similar is happening all over the world.

Knowledge Production From Indefinite Detention

Omid: Elahe is an architect, artist, filmmaker, photographer, and journalist who uses her training and skills to expose the systems of oppression, domination and subjugation characteristic of Australia's border regime. She also examines the built environment of prison; the natural environment of the island nation of Nauru; the brutal, targeted and ever-changing bureaucracy and policies; and the ideologies, discourses and actions of government authorities, corporate representatives, prison guards and other staff.

While held in detention, Elahe was also using her training and experience in visual arts, architecture and journalism to help support the well-being and struggle of others in the prison camp. Her research and critique of the interlocking systems of violence and exclusion began while incarcerated and continues as she enters another phase of control and degradation outside the prison. Her current work – especially her film *Architect*, her 3D model of the prison, and our upcoming exhibition at UTS Data Arena (*Weapons of*

Slow Destruction; developed with the UTS Data Arena team) – builds on what she experienced and witnessed and the many strategies and methods she developed to help her understand, heal and resist.

Elahe: I started researching and analysing the architecture of torture when I was exiled to Nauru in 2013. A brutal industry has been established and field-tested on desperate refugees sent to Nauru (and other sites) by consecutive Australian governments. While there were Australian detention facilities in Nauru from 2001 onwards, these were much smaller in scale and only held several hundred refugees inside a disused former primary school on the island. New facilities were built in Nauru for the second iteration of the 'Pacific Solution' to hold women, unaccompanied minors and families. Since 2012/2013, the border-industrial complex has built more expansive facilities that were purpose-built to hold refugees and where, as I argue, key principles of architectural design were deliberately employed to create hostile and abusive spaces; sites designed to torture the detainees and break them psychologically, emotionally and physically.

No filming, photography or independent journalists are allowed anywhere near the detention centers, and very little information has been made publicly available by the Australian or Nauruan governments. This makes any architectural assessment of the facilities extremely difficult. However, during my 6 years of detention, I was able to secretly video and photograph RPC3 (one of the compounds) extensively.

I have used this footage, as well as interviews conducted with dozens of other former detainees, to recreate an accurate 3D model of RPC3 to assist my critical analysis





and exposé of these secretive facilities, as well as to make a full-length documentary on the topic called *Architect*.

I will use my 3D model and my own architectural knowledge and skills, together with the photos and interviews I collected while in the detention centre, to illustrate the key points of my argument. My central claim is that the Australian-run offshore detention centers represent an architecture of torture that has been implemented in the most deliberate fashion to physically and mentally break refugees, including women and children, who were arbitrarily sent there by the Australian government. This ruthless approach is primarily to terrify other would-be asylum seekers from attempting to reach Australia, a tactic which communicates a message to vulnerable and desperate people, groups and communities around the world about the horrors that await them. When I refer to the architecture of torture, I am not only critically analysing the location, ecosystem, and the physical structure of the detention center. I am also referring to the partnership between form and function in this uniquely designed place of torture.

This architecture of torture is also the reason why there is so much secrecy around these facilities. The carceral sites represent a breach of international law committed by Australia. This is profoundly embarrassing for the Australian government which claims to respect human rights domestically and internationally. Australia often lectures other countries for not respecting international human rights law, while simultaneously communicating a different message to people seeking asylum. In contrast to the discourse of deterrence and its related images regularly circulated by the Australian

government to many marginalised and stigmatised communities, the horrors of these detention centres are hidden, ignored or misconstrued in the polite and sanitized international spaces where human rights are discussed and promoted. The aim of our collaborative creative and intellectual work is to shed light on the secret architecture of these offshore prison camps; critically analyse how and why they were designed and built; interrogate the relationship with the wider border-industrial complex and exploitation of refugees for political purposes; and argue why it is so important that such detention centers are never built again to hold human beings, especially vulnerable refugees. This final point is extremely urgent since Australia has been exporting its policies and ideologies to other places such as the UK and some European countries.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTED STRICT MEASURES TO KEEP INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS, HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS, AND OTHER SUPPORT NETWORKS OUT OF NAURU

Omid: Elahe realised the need for collaboration in order to create new concepts and theories for representing and unpacking the fluid and unpredictable nature of the situation in indefinite offshore detention. She understood that collective resistance was necessary; she worked together with others inside the facility, while also connecting with people outside. The interpretations and critical analyses that have emerged combine elements related to her identity, history and influences; the different individuals and communities incarcerated in Nauru; and the people and groups she has been collaborating with outside. These elements involve cultural heritage, training and skills, lived experiences, artistic and intellectual approaches, political visions, and more. Working with a range of people, she has developed new terms and perspectives appropriate for addressing the interlocking systems of oppression,

domination and submission – our own collaboration soon developed into a shared philosophical activity, and this collective and creative resistance now forms the basis for Nauru Prison Theory. She realised that previous theories and concepts for interpreting and exposing this form of border violence, displacement and exile are insufficient, inaccurate or misleading. In this context, literature, art, philosophies of resistance, traditions of women's struggle, customs of care, and cultural heritage have been vital not just for survival and healing but also for consciousness raising and action. From the time she was exiled and incarcerated in Nauru (and held briefly in Christmas Island before that) she was considering writing a book and creating art that reflected her experiences. Finding the most appropriate styles, forms and approaches took many years – it is an ongoing process that continues today and involves close consultation and collaboration with others. Now that we have been collaborating for some time, our work is taking shape and moving in important directions.

We expected that this work would take a long time to attract attention and meaningful long-term support. The Australian government implemented strict measures to keep independent journalists, human rights groups, advocates and other support networks out of Nauru and worked to limit any communication with people around the world. The mainstream media also cooperated with people in positions of power to maintain the secrecy and silencing strategies associated with the offshore carceral site. Access to the country was made extremely difficult and communication with people detained there faced many obstacles. In addition to these restrictions and abuses, Elahe faced particular forms of gendered violence and intersectional discrimination from authorities, and also some people she was in contact with on the outside, which added further complications for her resistance and the development of her activist-focused creative and intellectual work.

She always imagined that her stand against the border regime was going to shake the whole system, but she soon realised that it was going to take time. It has now been eleven years since she was first exiled and incarcerated by the Australian government, and five years since she left Nauru. Elahe was transferred to the US as part of the 'refugee swap' deal made between

the US and Australia (officially called the Australia-United States Resettlement Agreement, originally introduced by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and President Barack Obama, and continued by subsequent prime ministers and presidents). As more scandals and controversies related to Australia's border regime are revealed she is expecting further responses to her work and more opportunities to collaborate in ways that position her as an expert, leader, intellectual and creative; that is, as an authoritative knowledge producer in this field. We call on academics, researchers, artists, activists, and others to engage with us and support our carefully devised and practiced forms of collective and creative resistance.

Omid Tofighian is an award-winning lecturer, researcher and community advocate, combining philosophy with interests in citizen media, popular culture, displacement and discrimination. He is affiliated with the School of the Humanities & Languages, University of New South Wales, Australia; and the School of Law, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK. His publications include Myth and Philosophy in Platonic Dialogues (Palgrave 2016); the translation of Behrouz Boochani's multi-award-winning book, No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison (Picador-Pan Macmillan 2018); as co-editor of special issues for journals Literature and Aesthetics (2011), Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media (2019) and Southerly (2021); and co-translator/co-editor of Freedom, Only Freedom: The Prison Writings of Behrouz Boochani (Bloomsbury 2023).

An award-winning Iranian artist, architectural designer, journalist, and documentary film maker, Elahe Zivardar currently lives in Arizona, United States, where she obtained refugee status in 2019. After fleeing Iran, she was detained on the remote island of the Republic of Nauru for attempting to seek asylum in Australia from 2013 to 2019. During her detention in Nauru, she was highly active in using photos and video to document the horrific treatment and conditions endured by people seeking asylum and imprisoned offshore. An artist using diverse techniques including painting, photography and documentary filmmaking, Zivardar seeks to depict and raise awareness on how refugee, stateless and migrant minorities are treated throughout the migration process, especially at borders. In addition to her artwork, she is active as an advisor to international refugee rights campaigns and organizations in Australia, the UK, and US. Website: shakibaproductions.com