

Julia Caroline Morris, *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781501765841 (cloth); ISBN: 9781501765865 (ebook)

The international refugee regime has always narrated itself through the language of protection. Julia Caroline Morris asks what happens when we narrate it through the language of extraction. The shift directs us towards a set of productive questions: who benefits from the system, who is consumed by it, how are human beings reconstituted as a revenue source, and what does the apparatus actually produce? *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru* pursues these questions with analytical clarity and ethnographic sensitivity, arguing that the refugee industry operates through the same logic as the colonial resource industries it succeeded. Yet the coloniality of the asylum regime is not merely analogy. The book’s force lies precisely in Morris’s careful tracing of how “colonial forms of extraction create the conditions of possibility” (p.5) for offshore refugee processing. Property regimes, labour forces, and built infrastructure endure as the commodity modulates from minerals to people.

Morris grounds her argument on Nauru, a raised coral atoll in the central Pacific nearly destroyed by a century of phosphate mining. By the 1990s, 80% of the island had been stripped to barren limestone pinnacles, its soils poisoned, its freshwater contaminated. When the wealth derived from phosphate was depleted, the sovereign state found economic resurrection in a new commodity: processing Australia’s unwanted asylum seekers. Morris’s central claim is that these two enterprises are materially and structurally continuous—as one Nauruan bureaucrat puts it, “The refugees, it’s just like phosphate” (p.31). Colonial land tenure systems persist as “refugee royalties day” mirrors “phosphate royalties day”. The island operates as “a refugee company town in miniature” (p.2): a mono-economy organised around a single commodity, sustained by fly-in-fly-out labour, governed by the temporal anxieties of boom and bust.

Across six tightly structured chapters that move between colonial history, industrial ethnography, and the politics of representation, Morris weaves these continuities into a single analytical frame. Where scholars such as Gómez-Barris (2017) have theorised extractivism as a spatial logic, the “extractive zone” produced through colonial ways of seeing, Morris

demonstrates another dimension of this arrangement: how one extraction materially produces the conditions for the next, how the ruined landscape of phosphate became the built environment of asylum. This is extractivism as historical sedimentation. The ruins of one industry became, quite literally, the foundations of the next. Both enterprises share toxic externalities: phosphate mining poisoned soils and contaminated air; the asylum industry produces accumulated harms to bodies and psyches that compound under indefinite processing.

Morris does not stop at tracing the historical layering of extractive processes. Following recent work that has expanded extractivism beyond the mine and the well (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019), she reveals their increasing penetration across different domains—bodies, narratives, psychic life—through what she terms “intimate extraction” (p.70). Refugees are compelled to present themselves through legal narratives of trauma, to submit their bodies and biographies to invasive medical and legal evaluation. The refugee does not merely suffer extraction. They must actively produce the commodity—a legible and exchangeable claim to suffering—from the raw material of their own life. This formulation extends the analytical lineage that scholars of racial capitalism have traced from mines to plantations to prisons, but it names something those accounts have not fully reckoned with: extraction that can only proceed through the active labour of the person being extracted. At every stage, from the extraction of raw life material, through status determination, to the production of the rejected or resettled refugee, value accrues to institutions, consultants, and governments, while the person at the centre of the process is depleted. Morris’s methodology of “following value” across the commodity chain traces the circuits of capital, labour, and representation connecting Geneva to Canberra to Nauru. She rejects the neat spatial boundaries through which the asylum system is usually apprehended and follows instead a commodity chain that runs through boardrooms and barracks alike. For radical geographers seeking to understand how bordering regimes generate value rather than merely exclude, this reframing shifts the terrain of debate decisively. The task facing geographers of migration is not merely to chart how asylum rights are eroded across the spatially fragmented architectures of offshore processing within and across national territory, but to reckon with extraction as constitutive of the regime itself across scales.

Morris conducted multi-sited fieldwork across Nauru, Geneva, Australia, and Fiji over 15 months—a breadth and depth of engagement that is striking and likely unrepeatably. Nauru’s government severely restricted outside entry after 2014, and virtually no ethnographic research has been conducted on the island since. Most accounts of its refugee regime rely on leaked documents, journalism, and activist testimony produced at considerable distance. Morris’s work is therefore analytically significant and archivally irreplaceable, a record of a political formation that normally remains closed to outside scrutiny. The ethnographic achievement, though, lies in what the access enabled: an account that refuses the victim–perpetrator binary structuring nearly all discussion of offshore processing. The moral clarity of denouncing offshore detention has understandably dominated the literature. Morris does not dispute this reality, but she does something more difficult: she holds it alongside the complexity of Nauruan life without reaching for resolution. Nauruan interlocutors emerge as people who are both agents of containment and navigators of a resource-cursed economy they did not design: islanders who left phosphate mining and other work for the processing centres, residents who recount the corruption that overtook their government, opposition politicians who instrumentalise Australian media interest for their own shifting ends. Morris allows these figures to be contradictory, beneficiaries and casualties of the same machine. She sits with discomfort rather than resolving it into moral verdict. In doing so, she answers substantively the call to “demigrantize” migration studies (Anderson 2019), attending to the wider political economy that produces both refugees and the communities conscripted to contain them.

Perhaps the most unsettling argument concerns the politics of representation. Morris demonstrates that humanitarian activists and the border security state rely on complementary racialised representations that together sustain the industry. The state racialises refugees as dangerous and illegal. Activists deploy a “moral vernacular of vulnerability” (p.21) that constructs refugees as voiceless victims requiring salvation, while depicting Nauruans through colonial tropes of savagery. Since offshore processing began, Nauruans have been cast through global media campaigns as “refugee beaters”, “cruel in the extreme”, inhabitants of a “heart of darkness”. These representations often fuel the political-economic cycle, obscure the “shared conditions of exploitation” (p.195) between Nauruans and refugees, and reproduce the colonial

hierarchies on which the whole arrangement depends. Morris traces the same representational machinery at work in the EU–Turkey agreement and the now defunct UK–Rwanda deal, where defence against offshore relocation often relied on orientalist tropes of backwardness that reaffirmed the West’s moral supremacy as a guarantor of rights, safety, and freedom. At times, there is a risk of overstating the homogeneity of solidarity discourses, or underestimating the material necessity that drives migrants and their supporters to strategically instrumentalise narratives of vulnerability, but the structural claim holds, and with considerable force.

Morris’s book also opens questions that deserve sustained pursuit—a mark of its generativity. One concerns the labour sustaining the system itself. Moving migration debates beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion to the continuum of racialised extraction forces us to confront who works in industries of asylum, containment, and care, and on what terms. If extractive industries “have a history of carving out discriminatory labor practices along carefully designed racial/ethnic hierarchies” (p.156), the refugee industry is no exception. The workforce is itself stratified in terms of mobility and choice: Australian contractors and professionals on fly-in-fly-out cycles at the top, earning AU\$80,000–100,000 with hazard pay and the privilege of flying out to “detox” between rotations (p.135); Nauruan workers drawn into menial facility employment at AU\$4.25 per hour in the middle; and at the bottom, the refugee, at once the object of governance and a labourer compelled to produce the very commodity on which the entire chain depends. Tracing this hierarchy—from those who can leave, to those who must stay, to those who can neither stay nor move—offers a frame that extends well beyond Nauru, to any site where industries of containment reproduce racialised divisions of mobility and labour that cut across the framework of citizenship.

Another question concerns afterlives. Morris closes with “a genuine concern with what will be left in Nauru in the wake of another failed, and ultimately destructive, industrial enterprise” (p.27). If offshore regimes operate through boom-bust cycles—and Nauru’s on-again, off-again history makes this brutally evident—then the question of what remains after the bust acquires real urgency. What will the asylum industry leave in its wake? Morris traces these accumulations on Nauru: rusted phosphate turrets and the British Phosphate Commission train tracks joined by the burned-out husk of Regional Processing Centre 3 and a boarded-up Persian

restaurant (pp.243), a country left with “the toxic remainders of commercial processes” (p.258). Connecting her framework to scholarship on imperial durabilities (Stoler 2016) could help theorise how extractive industries persist long after the enterprise moves on. But there is a sharper edge to this question. What afterlives emerge when the asylum system itself is delegitimised? In an era of resurgent fascism and militarised borders, the regime Morris anatomises is under attack from directions that share none of her emancipatory commitments. The challenge is to understand how a system can be both extractive and tactically defended. Critical scholarship on the death of asylum (Mountz 2020) has charted the institutional erosion and its devastating consequences for migrant lives; Morris reveals the extractive logic that was there from the start. Holding both insights together is the difficult and necessary work ahead.

Morris has given us the clearest account of why the offshore model keeps reproducing itself. She asks “how we can move toward a place where proving suffering and worth need not be a condition for people’s mobility” (p.73)—a question that cuts to the heart of the regime’s extractive logic. Her concluding vision of a “mobility commons”, an alternative to the hierarchies of suffering structuring the asylum system, deserves further elaboration from radical geographers. If the refugee system is an extractive industry premised on racial subordination, the response cannot be better processing centres or faster determination timelines. It must be a refusal of the conditions that make human beings into extractable resources. This critique lands at a moment when liberal asylum frameworks are collapsing under the weight of authoritarian resurgence. That makes it more urgent, not less. The sharper the analysis, the better equipped we are to defend the rights of migrants and refugees to stay or move without falling back on liberal humanitarian narratives that masked the operations of power we now see in full force.

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Danai Avgeri
Department of Social Anthropology
University of St Andrews
da205@st-andrews.ac.uk