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BOOK REVIEW

Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru. By Julia Caroline Morris. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2023. 308 pp.

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Julia Caroline Morris' important new book on refugee policy in Nauru begins with the chemical equation for extracting superphosphate from phosphate rock. For anyone who knows the history of Nauru, phosphate is core to the story. This tiny Pacific nation with a population of around 10,000, on a single island no larger than Melbourne's airport, grew so rich from selling phosphate that in the 1980s it was briefly the second richest country per capita in the world. But the wealth was eventually squandered, and the extraction had other costs: to the environment and the health of Nauruan citizens. Nearly bankrupt, Nauru was seeking other revenue streams when Australian officials first sought its assistance in 2001 to manage the arrival of people seeking asylum by boat.

Morris' innovation is to develop a theory of extraction that extends far beyond this moment of political opportunism. Refugees, Morris argues, are extracted for their value in much the same way that the Australian government and companies once extracted value from phosphate rock. Extracting value from refugees – the "human extractive industry" (256) – requires government investment in massive and complex infrastructure. It generates enormous profits for the companies that build this infrastructure and deliver the services. It requires the management of international relations and markets and the creation of a workforce with specific extraction skills and equipment. It also produces waste and irreparable damage to the environment, human health and the social fabric. Profits are distributed unequally and without a long-term plan. When the resource or its market is no longer viable, it can render the host bankrupt and leave a landscape of ruins, literally and figuratively.

The book is particularly masterful in the way Morris juxtaposes the historical accounts of resource extraction with contemporary aspects of refugee policy. She positions Nauru within the extensive resource extraction literature from the colonized and developing world. The parallels are striking, and the analysis is powerful. This book will shape future scholarship on the political economy of refugee policies everywhere.

Morris' book is also a rich ethnography of life in Nauru. It details how Australia's decision to send refugees to Nauru for detention and processing in 2001, and again in 2012, has impacted life on this small island nation. The book describes the policy's impact on Nauru's macro- and micro-economics, its social fabric, and Nauruans'

sense of identity. She writes, correctly, that the lives of everyday Nauruans have been "woefully" underrepresented, in large part because of the restrictions placed on outsiders visiting the island. Morris' access to Nauru was made possible through her enrollment through the University of South Pacific, and she notes that her access was granted because of her assurances that she would not write an activist account of refugee policy. This agreement was vital to her access and to producing this rare account of Nauruan life. It does mean, however, that her representation of the impact of Australia's policy on refugees is likely to have been constrained in ways that Morris cannot be explicit about.

One illustrative example is the way the book deals with the conditions of refugee detention and containment. Most of the book's information on this topic comes from media statements from the former President Baron Waqa, which are cited at length without critical analysis. This approach is remarkable for two reasons. First is the extravagant material benefits, detailed by Morris, that Waqa and his colleagues enjoyed as a result of Australian largesse: chauffeur-driven luxury cars; vast exotic buffets; and shopping sprees (with stipends) for Nauruan citizens. In a nation that had just celebrated the arrival of its first ATM, the pomp and luxury enjoyed by its political elite is astonishing. Yet apart from these details, which come quite late in the book, the political economy of complicity and corruption among the Australian and Nauruan elite, now well-documented, is missing from Morris' account. This sort of analysis is, perhaps, a necessary omission on Morris' part and indicates the substantial challenges of establishing and maintaining access and ethnographic relationships in a fraught political context.

The second reason is the overwhelming evidence of the damage caused to refugees by their detention and containment on Nauru. While Morris acknowledges that the policy is damaging, descriptions of the actual harms are largely missing from this book. For example, the self-immolation of two refugees in 2016 is mentioned in one sentence. There is no mention of the Australian Federal Court challenges to stop refugees' transfer for medical treatment or the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court's conclusion that Australia's offshore detention regime constitutes "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment." The Guardian's "Nauru files" of leaked incident reports and cases of rape and other violence are packaged as part of a "tremendous activist scene" (67) created by manipulative refugees and advocates.

As an ethnographer, Morris has an entirely different insight and body of data from those who analyze Nauru from a distance. Perhaps inevitably, the book has an awkward relationship with scholars, journalists and human rights officials who write about refugees in Nauru (and who are arguably this book's target readership). The large volume of evidence published on refugee policy in Nauru is disregarded on the basis that the authors have a political agenda and were unable to travel there. The *Guardian*, and to a lesser extent the ABC, Australia's public broadcaster, come in for particular criticism and disregard, despite the fact that these organizations have been denied access to Nauru since 2014. Yet, as evidence of transparency, Morris cites the invitation to conservative television outlets Channel 9 and Rupert Murdoch's Sky News during an Australian election campaign, despite both organizations' long history of support for the incumbent Coalition government and their energetic promotion of a tough-on-borders agenda.

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Morris mounts two specific accusations against scholars and advocates. The first is that advocates perpetuate the trope of the savage Nauruan, an idea that extended to pre-colonial times and manifests today with characterizations of Nauruans as rapists and attackers of refugees. This is a well-founded argument, and all those who write about refugee policy in Nauru should heed its message.

The second accusation is that advocates and refugees are locked into a mutually dependent and manipulative relationship. Both groups, she argues, aim to get refugees off Nauru and, in the process, do as much damage to Nauru as possible. Advocates, she argues, extract "moral value" from refugees; they construct personal identities and political legitimacy from refugee harm. Refugees, driven by the desire to leave Nauru, "ingratiate" (114) themselves with advocates and exaggerate instances of harm. Motivated only by the possibility of resettlement elsewhere, she suggests refugees also engage cynically with the Nauruan community, unwilling to make real connections with Nauruan people. What Morris observes could be explained in a different way: as people negotiating asymmetries of power to generate a degree of control over their future. Instead, some of her language may seem ungenerous, and in the process, Morris herself appears to have inadvertently recreated the trope of the ungrateful refugee. A less antagonistic, more nuanced, engagement with extant scholarship would have strengthened the arguments even more. But perhaps these are the constraints created by the need to produce an ethnography such as this in a highly politicized and emotionally charged environment.

The book is a substantial achievement. Its theory of extraction, and ethnography of the impact of the refugee extractive industry on life in Nauru, should have a deep impact on refugee scholarship internationally. The book argues, ultimately, for greater freedom of human mobility, and its demands that refugee scholars and advocates reflect on their gain and that complicity in border management should be heeded.

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