I Call it a Prison Because it is a Prison

Farhad Bandesh, Farhad Rahmati, and Andrew Brooks

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On the first Sunday of August in 2020, the same day that the state of Victoria would declare a state of disaster in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, I (Andrew Brooks) received a text message in my inbox. The message said: 'Samad, waking up in his room in Gordon, Port Moresby' and included a link to a sound recording exactly ten minutes long. Over the next month I would receive a text like this, each time delivering a ten-minute audio recording directly to my phone. The recordings would arrive at unpredictable times: first thing in the morning or as I was preparing a mid-morning coffee or just before getting into bed for the night. The collection of text messages and audio recordings formed a project called *where are you today* that documented the day to day lives of a group of men imprisoned in Australian immigration detention facilities across Australia and Papua New Guinea. The archive of recordings is the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, a group of men (Farhad Bandesh, Farhad Rahmati, Samad Abdul, Shamindan Kanapathi, Thanush Selvraj, Yasin Abdallah) who, at the time, were imprisoned in indefinite detention for seeking asylum in Australia, and their collaborators based in Melbourne/Naarm (André Dao, Michael Green, and Jon Tjhia).[1] The group's name appropriates the acronym of the prison in which they spent the bulk of their detention, the Manus Regional Processing Centre.

This project is the second by the collective, building on an archive of recordings made in 2018 called *how are you today* that was commissioned by Liquid Architecture curators Joel Stern and James Parker for the exhibition *Eavesdropping*. The earlier project documented the multiple offshore border prisons created by the Australian government in the town of Lorengau on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, following the closure of the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre in October 2017. Each day, over the course of the 14-week exhibition, one ten-minute sound recording was made by one of the men on Manus Island and sent via WhatsApp or Telegram to the collective members in Melbourne, who would then upload the recording for broadcast in the gallery. At the conclusion of the exhibition, the collective had produced a

14-hour archive documenting the policing of the border and the extension of Australia's carceral system offshore.

The archive makes a portrait of a fluid and evolving carceral system not merely defined by its physical infrastructures but also by social, spatial, temporal, and affective relations. 'Technologies of confinement', writes Emma Russell (2020),

> exceed the conventional spatial infrastructure of the prison or camp (such as razor wire, cement walls, guards patrolling the perimeter) to encompass temporal forms of restriction (such as curfews, sentence length, or the absence of one) and the inscription of incarceration upon bodies. (5)

As I have previously argued, this archive with its multiple and conflicting temporalities – the ten-minute field recording, the 14-hour archive, the ongoingness of detention – reveals how indefinite imprisonment enacts state-sanctioned forms of slow violence (Nixon 2011) and slow death (Berlant 2007) upon the incarcerated. The sound recordings capture both the environment of detention and the presence of person detained. We listen to these scenes, conscious of their mediation through the men recording them. We hear the physical environment but we also hear – in a sigh or the tone of voice or the rate of breathing – how the affective and temporal conditions of imprisonment imprint on the bodies of the incarcerated. At different moments, we register a sense of fatigue, exhaustion, optimism, frustration, anger. The recordings capture what Russell (2020) refers to as 'carceral atmospheres', 'the spatialisation of affect through technologies of confinement' (5).

where are you today continues the project of documenting and archiving the cruelty of Australia's refugee policy. The work records the expansion of the immigration prison system as a result of the Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill 2018, commonly referred to as the 'Medevac Bill', which came into law on March 2, 2019. The bill enabled critically ill refugees held in offshore detention facilities the right to be transferred to Australia for urgent medical attention. While the bill was passed into law, it faced stiff opposition from the sitting Liberal–National Coalition Government who argued that the change would weaken border security efforts and potentially compromise national security. From August to November 2019, detainees formerly imprisoned on Manus and Nauru Islands were transferred to various

locations in Australia or to Port Moresby under the Medevac legislation. In December of the same year, the Federal Government passed a bill to repeal the Medevac legislation (Migration Amendment [Repairing Medical Transfers] Bill 2019). Refugees evacuated under the first piece of legislation suddenly found themselves indefinitely detained 'onshore' in a range of locations, including both government-run Immigration Transit Accommodation and makeshift locations such as the Mantra Hotel in Melbourne or the Mercure Darwin Airport Resort. As the COVID-19 pandemic intensified, refugees remained in dangerous and makeshift prisons that posed a heightened risk of contagion. *where are you today* documents these sites of imprisonment, capturing the diffusion of refugees across the country and the shifting conditions of their confinement. This essay-interview includes recordings from the *where are you today* archive. The full archive can be accessed here.

On 16 October 2020, I sat down over Zoom with Farhad Bandesh and Farhad Rahmati, both of whom had, at the time, been in detention since 2013. Our conversation covered their experiences of detention, the seeming indifference to the plight of refugees from the Australian public, the cruelty of Australia's immigration policy, the Manus Recording Project Collective, and the challenges of abolition. Farhad Bandesh is a Kurdish musician, painter, and poet who has been a vocal critic of Australia's border policy. He is softly spoken and passionate about art. Farhad Rahmati is a civil engineer from Khorramabad, Iran, who exudes a mixture of weariness and optimism. Both men are committed activists for refugee rights and both have suffered for their outspoken criticisms of the conditions refugees face. Despite this, they retain an unwavering commitment to dismantle the border-industrial complex. As of February 2021, both Farhad Bandesh and Farhad Rahmati are no longer imprisoned. On 11 December 2020, Bandesh was released into the community on a bridging visa. And on 17 February 2021, Rahmati was granted asylum in the US and released from detention. Both men spent eight years imprisoned in offshore and onshore locations.

To begin, I asked both Bandesh and Rahmati, to tell us where they were detained at the time and to describe the conditions they faced. Bandesh began:

> I am, at the moment, in MITA, in Melbourne Immigration gaol. You know, I was

> in Mantra Hotel, for nine months I was locked up completely – no fresh air, no sunshine. I had to fight three months against this cruelty. I was the one who opened the window like 10cms. I had to fight and speak out about my rights and other's rights. You know, the simple things. It's really ridiculous. I am a human yet I cannot have sunshine, I am a human yet I cannot have fresh air. This is the basic rights, everyone should have access to that. They [the government] say that you are in four-star hotels. And always I ask the ABF [Australian Border Force], if I am in a four-star hotel, why I cannot simply go to the swimming pool, I cannot access the restaurant. […] Don't say that's a four-star hotel. It is a torturing centre.

Rahmati picked up on the dehumanising nature of detention: 'We are talking about a system who treats you like a criminal if you try to defend your basic human rights.' He explained where he was detained and how his activism had led directly to him being moved:

> Right now I'm in BITA – Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation – where I've been locked up for the past four months. I used to be in KP [Kangaroo Point Central Hotel]. And actually it's good to know that both of us have been persecuted somehow for our advocacy. Almost four months ago, I was told that I have to pack up and I have fifteen minutes to pack up and be ready to be transferred to BITA. And then that night, a lot of supporters came around KP and they stopped this transfer. And the next day around 7am, seven ERT officers (ERT stands for Emergency Response Team) they rushed into my room, turned me on my face, handcuffed me at the back, and like a highly-wanted terrorist they brought me back to BITA. And they kept me in an office for a few hours and then I was placed in a high security compound where they basically keep criminals, I mean ex-criminals, those who have served their time in prison. So I was placed in that compound for almost two weeks.

Bandesh went on to describe the room he was sitting in. 'It's so small', he said, before tapping on a flimsy, grey wall made from what appeared to be sheets of plastic. 'The room is not really a room. Can you hear? It's not a room. […] When they say what's your room number? I say: it's not a room. We are like a chicken farm here. I always say this is a chicken farm, don't call it accommodation.' He went on to describe the outdoor area: 'the yard is too small, it's not too much… And you can see the bars, like four metres tall. It

reminds you of the trauma of what happened to you on Manus Island.'

I asked each of them to talk a bit about their daily routine and how they deal with the experience of indefinite imprisonment. Bandesh spoke of the centrality of music and art in his daily life: 'I think everyone listens to music.'

He went on to explain that creative expression was central to dealing with his situation. 'I need to release some more songs', he told me. 'They are political songs, these days I just write political songs. I am working on some digital work and some animation as well, for one of my songs. Otherwise, I just talk to my family and friends and those people who are caring about me.'

Rahmati had a more programmatic approach to the day and recalled a scene from the film *Shawshank Redemption* as a way of introducing his need for structure.

> I'll just explain about a movie that I have seen called Shawshank Redemption… it's a great movie. There is some very famous dialogue in that movie that says a prison has three different stages: first, you hate the bars; second, you get used to the bars; and the last stage, which is the most dangerous one, is when you love the bars. So I had this in my mind since 2013 and I never wanted to love these bars, I always hate these bars, and I know out there there is a life waiting for me and I want to get out of this situation.
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> So my daily life is I wake up at 5:30, go to gym, do one hour gym, have a shower and have breakfast. I picked up a few online studies. I do my online studies, talk to family, talk to friends. Then, afternoon, almost the same again: I go to gym, do some exercise, do some online studies, watch movies, talk to friends. Actually, now is almost my gym time…

I wanted to ask Bandesh and Rahmati about their use of language, about their rejection of the official, bureaucratic terminology used to describe the places they had been held – Melbourne/Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation or Manus Regional Processing Centre, for example. I noticed that both men pointedly referred to these places as prisons or gaols, a characterisation echoed by Behrouz Boochani (2018) in *No Friend but the Mountains*, his account of his time in Manus prison. 'The government is always changing the

name', Bandesh reflected. 'Before we came to Australia, they called refugees and other detainees "clients". Now we are "detainees". I am asking for my safety and freedom, that's my crime.' Rahmati expanded: 'Right now I googled detainee and the Oxford Dictionary says "Detainee is a person held in custody especially for political reasons." So, that's me. Absolutely that defines my situation.' Both understood themselves as political prisoners, trapped by a political system and news cycle that criminalises refugees and willfully conflates asylum seeking with the threat to border security. And both were unequivocal that these spaces were spaces of confinement and punishment. Bandesh put it like this: 'we are in prison. I can call it prison because it is a prison. […] Everywhere is bars, fences, wires. You have no right to speak, you have no right to say something about your rights.' Rahmati pushed back against the euphemistic use of processing, saying: 'We were held in "processing" centres yet we have done all our processes. So the process is not the point any more and we are not going to be deported to our country because we are refugees. Why, then, are you keeping us in detention? That's definitely a political reason, nothing else.'

Both men spoke of the restrictions placed on refugees that were designed to limit their ability to communicate with the world outside the prison, most notably the legislation recently proposed by the Federal Government to ban the use of mobile phone in immigration detention centres – Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2020. While this bill did not ultimately pass into law, it indexes the government's desire to isolate refugees and limit their contact with the media and the public at large. 'The main reason that the government tried to pass this bill and make it a legislation was actually to silence us', said Rahmati. He continued:

> They don't want us to be seen by the people, they don't want us to be heard by the people. […] I'm not saying that everyone who works in the detention system is nasty, but believe me, they are not the best people in the world. So we are using our phones when they are trying to bully us, we use our phones to record them, we want to make them accountable to what they are doing.

Bandesh agreed and told me that the authorities 'are scared because we are showing the reality. And the people realise and watch and see what's happening here and the authorities don't want that. They want everyone to be

silent'. For Bandesh, access to mobile phones is critical, enabling both contact with loved ones and the capacity to do activist work:

> As a human I have a voice, they cannot take my voice away… I never stop, they know. […] This device is helping us to know each other and share our stories. And also you could talk to your family and that's the first thing that will give you hope to survive in this horrible situation. You could talk with your friends and they give you hope, they share love with you, and you could forget for some time where you are, where you're kept. And you could do some activities, you could talk with your lawyer. Of course, you try to be free. That's your right.

But advocating for refugee rights and using that voice can result in forms of punishment and deprivation. 'They try to punish you, they try to make things really hard and harsh', he told me. 'When I was in Mantra Hotel, after five months with lots of requests [for art materials], finally they brought paint and brushes. […] And I asked for canvas… finally I got my canvas and I could paint for a few months. And then they forcibly removed me from there and they took my art materials for nearly six months now.' For Bandesh, the punishment for using his voice was a lack of access to materials that gave his day to day life a sense of structure. A recurring theme throughout our conversation was this battle against the isolating and alienating logic of the prison, a battle to remain connected despite the restrictions placed on them and the uncertain duration of detention.

The talk of phones prompted me to ask about the Manus Recording Project Collective and the *where are you today* archive. Bandesh reflected on the project:

> It was such a beautiful experience. […] It's just about those people who are in detention. And we could share our experiences and also, there are some messages if you look carefully at what we are doing. Someone is having coffee or green tea and just listening to music. It's really simple and just normal but where are they when they have green tea and listen to music? What's their feeling? What do you think when they are not free? […] There is a sadness to the recordings. I think people need to find that, not just listen [and think] oh, someone is playing music, having a green tea or whatever. There is some

> message, we need to get that message.

Bandesh is asking us to sit with the recordings and attune to the carceral atmospheres that they capture. This might involve cultivating what Poppy de Souza (2020) calls 'slow listening', which she describes as 'a modality of paying attending that takes seriously monotony, repetition and endurance' (10). Against the logic of the soundbite or the news clip, the recordings produced by the Manus Recording Project Collective ask us to stay with the mundanity of imprisonment. They seek to momentarily collapse the logic of the border, which seeks to produce and maintain distance. For de Souza, slow listening is a form of listening 'attentive to the art of making life in spaces of abandonment and disposability, where quiet forms of radical care and interdependence are heard and valued'. The recordings not only capture the alienation of imprisonment but moments of care, aid, collectivity, and joy.

We returned to the treatment of refugees by the state and the question of political organising. Both shared a skepticism around the idea of lobbying the government to change refugee policy, noting that the locking up of refugees is a platform shared by both major Australian political parties. 'I believe they [Labor and Liberal parties] are co-partners when it comes to refugees', Rahmati said. 'I don't buy Labor's outcrys about refugees', he said, tracing the long arc of mandatory asylum seeker detention back to the Labor government of 1992. He went on to speak about the sustained campaign waged by successive Federal governments to demonise and criminalise refugees.

> They've had years to cook the idea that these people are terrible people. I take you back to 2016, when [then-prime Minister] Malcom Turnbull talked on the phone with Donald Trump about the US deal [to resettle refugees held in Australia]. Trump was obviously against this deal and he asked: why are you not resettling them there, maybe they are bad people. […] And Malcom Turnbull described us as good people who have been screened for so many years. That they are not letting us in because of their policy. And then, just right before the Medevac Bill goes to the senate, Peter Dutton described us as paedophiles, rapists or murderers. So which one is correct? What I'm trying to say is that they had seven years and they cooked this idea and now… You go back to 2013, 2014, 2015, and try to check the photos (a photo tells a thousand words) of rallies in different cities in Australia for refugees. Each year

> you see lesser numbers and lesser numbers. And now… in different cities, just a small number comes out. I acknowledge the issue around the COVID-19 virus and how that has slowed down everything but in the best scenario we could gather 1000 people. […] What I'm trying to highlight here is that the root of this is in racism, we need to find the root in public not in the government. Because if the public stands up, the governments and the politicians, they will turn their face in the blink of an eye. That's the advantage of being a politician, you can just change in the blink of an eye. So if we could address the issue in public we might gain something.

Bandesh too spoke of the need to tell the public about the conditions that refugees face, as a starting point for building collective power:

> They [the public] still don't know that we are tortured and suffer from this system. […] The people always need knowledge about what's happening inside detention. Some people, they never believe us and they judge us. […] People need to think about human rights. We are human. If they accept that we are human, we have rights. Where are my rights? Where are Farhad's rights? That's the basic thing we need to talk about it. […] We need to promote these things to the wider Australian community. If they knew it, they will fight for us. When we have more people we have more power. And we break this cruelty.

For both men, a deep-seated racism lies at the heart of the treatment of refugees and the seeming indifference to their plight in this country. The fight to dismantle the carceral system in all of its forms, including at the border, must be also be grounded in anti-racist struggles. Rahmati noted that the border prison complex has claimed 14 lives in the past seven years. Deaths in custody disproportionately impact First Nations people and refugees, a fact highlights the racialising logics of the carceral system and its investment in the preservation of the white nation. Turning to the question of abolition, Rahmati asked: 'How we can talk about abolition when we know the root is so deep here.' His point was not that we should not struggle to abolish the carceral system but rather that we must acknowledge what such a struggle actually entails. 'What I'm trying to say here is that we are… experiencing a system that treats people based on racism. And we cannot bring up a conversation around abolition unless we address the racism which is in it.'

I want to end this interview with one more recording from the *where are you today* archive, one that indexes the dream of a life beyond detention.

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[1] Previous projects by the collective have also included the members Behrouz Boochani, Kazem Kazemi, and Abdul Aziz Muhamat.

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