



GETTING MY DIGNITY BACK

A report into **Behind the Wire**



Dr Sarah Strauven, Dr Jordana Silverstein and Associate Professor Karen Block
University of Melbourne



This report was prepared by Dr Sarah Strauven, Dr Jordana Silverstein and Associate Professor Karen Block from the University of Melbourne for the project coordinators of Behind the Wire.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Sarah Strauven, Jordana Silverstein and Karen Block. (2023).
"Getting my dignity back": A report into Behind the Wire.
Report prepared for Behind the Wire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

This report was researched and written on the lands of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We are grateful for the knowledge and insights that First Nations scholars, thinkers, history-writers and storytellers have produced, that aided and enabled our work.

ENQUIRIES

Dr Jordana Silverstein
Senior Research Fellow
Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness
Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne
185 Pelham Street, Carlton Victoria 3053
jordys@unimelb.edu.au

Report designed in-house by Gemma Tarpey-Brown, University of Melbourne.

Cover image by Ludvig Hedenborg and sourced from Pexels.

Images from the 'They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention' exhibition taken by Stewie Donn.

ABSTRACT

'Behind the Wire', an award-winning oral history project founded in 2014, documented through different media (including a website, book, podcast, exhibition) the stories of the people and children who were detained by the Australian government after seeking asylum in Australia. In the study reported here, researchers from the University of Melbourne interviewed 10 people who participated in the 'Behind the Wire' project. Of the ten participants, five had participated in the project whilst they were in immigration detention, five after they had been released. Through this study the authors sought to (1) understand how people conceptualise and understand their experiences of participation in Behind the Wire; (2) understand the social, cultural and political implications of such narratorial projects; and (3) help provide a model for undertaking similar projects in the future. Findings suggest that 'Behind the Wire' had a profound impact on most of those interviewed. It enabled them to share their story with broader publics, and to make sense for themselves of what they had been through. Key themes were that participation represented a way of resisting 'the system'; through processes described as meaningful and empowering; and resulted in important, impactful and durable records of peoples' experiences. As such, the project successfully provided an account of multiple histories, a space for self-expression, connection and personal growth, and a way for people to politically intervene and express their support and solidarity. 'Behind the Wire' is at once a political project and a work of art.

CONTENTS

BEHIND THE WIRE	5
INTRODUCTION	6
Aims	6
Methodology	7
Overview	8
Summary	8
PART ONE	9
What did participants want to get out of participating before they started?	9
The interview process	11
Expectations, opportunities and surprises	12
Thoughts on the book	14
Participating in the exhibition	16
Wanting people to know about who refugees are and their stories	17
Being happy with how their story was told	17
Telling friends and family about participation	18
What was learned through participating in this project	18
Interest in participating in other projects	19
Involvement in other projects	19
Problems or issues that were raised in the interviewing process	19
Aspects the interviewee would change about the process	20
PART TWO	21
Introduction	21
Reasons to participate	21
Effects of participation	25
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	31
Limitations of this study	31
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	32

BEHIND THE WIRE

Behind the Wire “is an oral history project documenting the stories of the men, women and children who have been detained by the Australian government after seeking asylum in Australia. The project was founded in 2014 with the aim of bringing a new perspective on mandatory detention: the reality of the people who have lived it.”

Coordinated by André Dao, Michael Green, Sherry Huang, and Camilla Chapman, with additional committees (including an Exhibition Committee made up of people with lived experience of immigration detention) and volunteers, Behind the Wire is comprised of a website, book (*They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention*), exhibition (*They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention*) held at the Immigration Museum as well as a travelling exhibition, podcast ([The Messenger](#)), videos, portrait photographs and audio stories.

It is a multi-award winning project. These awards include “the 2017 Australian Human Rights Commission Media Award and the 2016 Oral History Victoria Community Innovation Award. The Messenger podcast won the Grand Award at the 2017 New York Festivals International Radio Awards, the 2017 Walkley Award for Radio/Audio Feature, and Best Radio – Documentary at the UNAA Media Awards.” The “exhibition at the Immigration Museum, *They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention*, was chosen for the Contribution to Multiculturalism by a Community Organisation award at the 2017 Melbourne Awards” and it “won a 2018 Museums and Galleries National Award for best Temporary or Travelling Exhibition.”

Full details of the project can be found on the website: <https://behindthewire.org.au/>

INTRODUCTION

AIMS

In 2018, André Dao and Michael Green from Behind the Wire formed a partnership with the Melbourne Social Equity Institute through their Community Fellows Program, and through that with Associate Professor Karen Block and Dr Jordana Silverstein. On their advice, it was determined that a study which worked to understand the meaning, use, and benefits of Behind the Wire for participant narrators would be beneficial. This would help Behind the Wire to understand in new ways the work that they had undertaken, and to consider the relevance of future oral history projects. Dr Sarah Strauven, then a PhD student under the supervision of Dr Block – and who was conducting separate research involving stories of people with refugee experience – joined the study.

This study aimed to understand the use, importance, benefits and problems of the ‘Behind the Wire’ oral history project, from the perspective of the narrators who took part in it. The aim of this study was to understand how participants in Behind the Wire’s projects felt about that experience. Questions focused on participants’ motivations for taking part; their expectations and experiences of the process; and reflections on the outcomes with the benefits of hindsight. Through a series of interviews, we worked to:

1. Understand how people conceptualise and understand their experiences of participation in Behind the Wire.
2. Understand the social, cultural and political implications of such narratorial projects.
3. Help provide a model for undertaking similar projects in the future.

The key questions this study examined were:

- What were the experiences of the narrators who were interviewed for, and whose stories comprised, the Behind the Wire project?
- How does, and can, Behind the Wire serve as a model for other similar narratorial or oral history projects? What changes could, or should, be made to the practices of the Behind the Wire project team and methodology?

Researchers

There was minimal funding for this project. Dr Block participated as part of her role as a leader of the Migration and Social Cohesion Research Program in the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne; Dr Silverstein participated firstly through her role as an ARC Postdoctoral Research Associate in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne, then as an unfunded participant, and finally in her role as a Senior Research Fellow at the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness in the Melbourne Law School; Dr Strauven’s participation was initially funded through a Faculty of Arts Universal Grant provided to Dr Silverstein, and was then unfunded.

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment

Initially, a list of possible participants was assembled by André Dao and Michael Green, based on their assessment of who would be best placed to participate (based on recency of contact, level of participation in Behind the Wire, mental or physical health etc.). This list included 15 people. Sarah Strauven and Jordana Silverstein then contacted all 15 people on the list to invite them to participate, with 10 agreeing. As a result, André Dao and Michael Green are unaware of who exactly participated. Those who did not participate either did not respond to the invitation, did not have time, or were uncontactable.

It must be noted that due to the small number of participants this is not a representative study and we are not making claims for every participant in Behind the Wire. Rather, the findings reported here offer an introduction into participant narrators' ideas and experiences and they should be read as an opening, rather than a final and total conclusion.

Consent and risk management

Ethics approval for this research was gained from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee, Project ID number 1852149.1. Participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement and signed a consent form. Anonymity was offered to all participants, with allowance made for the fact that there is a small group of participants and anonymity is not always possible to guarantee, except for those whose stories were de-identified and used pseudonyms at the time of Behind the Wire. Some participants chose to be referred to by name, where appropriate. Participants were given details of specialised support services to contact if they encountered any difficulties as a result of their participation. All participants were given a \$50 gift voucher to thank them for their participation.

Participants

Of the ten participants, five had participated in Behind the Wire while they were in immigration detention, and five after they had been released. At the time of participation in this study, seven participants were in their 20s; 1 each was in their 30s, 40s and 50s. Two participants were women, eight were men. Interviews for this project were conducted in person with 3 participants (at a location of the participants' choice); 1 by phone; 2 by Whatsapp; 4 by Zoom/Skype. Participants had been detained in immigration detention centres on Christmas Island and Manus Island, and in the Curtin, Darwin, Port Hedland, Leonora, Baxter, and Maribyrnong detention centres, as well as in community detention. One participant had been in detention in the 1990s, one in the 2000s, and 8 in the 2010s.

Interviews

As noted, the ten participants were chosen based on advice from Behind the Wire, and then depending on whether an invitee agreed to participate. All interviews were conducted in English and took approximately one hour. The interviews were transcribed by Dr Strauven and analysed by all three researchers using qualitative techniques.

OVERVIEW

The report of the research findings consists of two parts:

Part one presents a descriptive overview of the findings of the interviews. It outlines people's responses across a number of key themes and questions. In keeping with the methodologies and approaches of Behind the Wire, as well as of this research project, this section is predominantly shaped around direct quotes from the participants.

Part two proposes an interpretative analysis of the reasons why people participated in Behind the Wire and the effects the project had on them and their lives. Particular attention is given to salient differences between those who participated in Behind the Wire whilst in detention and those who had already been released.

Finally, we present a **discussion** in which we summarise some of the key findings.

SUMMARY

Across the board, it was clear that participants in Behind the Wire found the project meaningful, rewarding and validating. It enabled them to share their story with the broader public, and to make sense for themselves of what they had been through. They had trust in Behind the Wire to tell their stories and create change. It was evident that this was a highly significant oral history project, providing space for people to tell their stories and for audiences to learn both individual and collective, as well as broader political, histories. Behind the Wire successfully provides an account of multiple histories, a space for self-expression, connection and personal growth, and a way for people to politically intervene and express their support and solidarity. It is a political project and a work of art.

PART ONE

The goal of the project was movingly summarised by one participant: "I would say the goal of the project is to humanise people, to give people humanity, to tell people that 'your dignity, it's yours, it's one of the valuable things, fight for it. And the way to fight for your dignity is here, is the platform: Speak.'"

What did participants want to get out of participating before they started?

Participants spoke about a range of motivations for participating in a Behind the Wire project:

- To illuminate who refugees are and why they take the journeys they do.
- To combat negative, or "horrible," things that are said about refugees in the media.
- To try to "change people's mind" about refugees and asylum seekers, and "reach their heart." It is better to provide stories, rather than ignoring people who oppose refugees.
- For someone who was out of detention but knew that others were still detained on Nauru and Manus Island, participation was a way to show that they knew they were not "safe", and an expression of the fact that "we're really sad about them and we knew how hard they live and we really wanted to make people know about them."
- Provide context to the story that the media presents: "A project like this is a great way of sharing the other side of the story which is not heard by ordinary citizens, which is not being shown by ordinary citizens because the media is tightly controlled."
- A way to help prevent the "suffering" of "future asylum seekers and refugees," to be "a drop in the ocean" of change, to be part of "giving back to the society. Giving back to fellow asylum seekers and refugees."
- To record "for history" what was occurring, and "pass this experience to the new generation and to the young generation and educate them through this project and this works that they hopefully, they don't do it again in, on different group of people."
- Be part of a group of stories, alongside other people.
- Tell the "truth" of what detention was like and why refugees come to Australia. Sharing the stories was a way to tell the truth to people in Australia who know nothing about what refugees and asylum seekers face.
- As part of a larger "fight for freedom for people, not for myself," and as part of remembering everyone who fought for their freedom: "This is my responsibility."
- The book has longevity that other projects – like being on television – don't. It is a physical object that will last and can be picked up by future generations. This made Behind the Wire a different type of project.

Participation for some on Manus Island was a means of passing the time, keeping busy, expressing what had happened, learning to write, learning English, sharing their hopes and dreams, sharing the reality of life on Manus, and educating people:

- One participant said that when they started sharing their writing on social media they “saw that that writing had power and it inspired me every single day when I was there. I didn’t know that I was writing my own biography or whatever, I just started writing.” Participating in Behind the Wire was an extension of this, providing an opportunity to “share my story with the rest of the world,” to tell the truth of what was happening and to share with people that “we have dreams and we have desires, but we don’t have the opportunities to fulfil our dreams and desires in our lives. Once we have an opportunity in our life to improve our life we make the most out of it so it was one of the good projects that I thought I’d be happy to involve.”
- Another participant said that participating was a way to be someone who makes changes and decisions. It was an expression of their “critical mind” and a way to “do my part.”
- It was a “very great opportunity to speak out,” because there are a lot of people who “don’t actually know what’s going on and it was great opportunity to tell people that we are stuck here and we are suffering here” and that pressure needs to be put on the government.
- It provided a means of “getting my dignity back.”
- It provided someone to listen: “I was in a desperate situation looking for someone that, at least from the other side where I could send a message that how I feel or what is going on in the centre, and [Michael] was just right there. He just popped up from nowhere and I was like ‘oh my God now I’ve got someone that I could be able to be with him for as long as he’s going to listen to me’. But also I was worried about that, whether they do have the time to listen to all what I have to say.” Michael “popped up as like an angel that someone sent to me. Like God sent to me and like ‘hey this guy, he was there and he was also wanting, he has the platform and if he could use your voice he will give you the platform.”

Of additional note, because of his relationship with Behrouz Boochani, there was trust from people on Manus Island that Michael would be the right person to engage with on this project, that he would listen and provide support.



Abdul Aziz Muhamat & Michael Green. Image sourced from [Behind the Wire education resources: Stories from mandatory detention](#)

The interview process

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of being interviewed.

On their experience with the particular interviewer they reported that:

- André “was a good listener.”
- “Michael explained things very well. And so he taught me a lot. And he was a journalist so it was a really wonderful experience to work with him on that project. And he is a very passionate person so it was a very nice experience.”
- “I need to thank Michael because with the time to do the interview and he was working hard, he was very nice and trying to help us in different way. Maybe I’m not participating much but I know that you are working for asylum seekers and how much time you spent for us, so I need to appreciate every single moment that you spend for us and it was a very good experience that I had. I always appreciated that and if there is more I would love to do.”
- The relationship with Michael was “very positive and like the interaction was just like ‘oh we already know each other for a couple of decades’ which we didn’t, we just met in one day and we did a project and that was it.” There is a continuing relationship and friendship and that is “important” because “someone who will put effort, time and coming to an island that pretty much tried to kept everyone away to do this project, so it was very, very valuable to me.”
- Laura was a “beautiful girl” who repeatedly reassured the participant that she didn’t have to share if she didn’t want to, that she could stop anytime: “When Laura was interviewing it was so chill and it was so nice and she was so caring.”
- Michael kept in touch and made sure everything was okay.
- Michael “actually convinced me in a manner that ‘your voice is such a powerful voice, you have the voice as a powerful voice and we want to use that voice in the platform like in the podcast where people could subscribe.”
- “Michael Green was researching the situation like you, looking under the microscope for virus, and that was very important to me because by the job he was doing and his group was doing, it showed me they are really passionate about this job and they really want to show Australian people what was wrong.”
- “The best thing I learned from the project of Behind the Wire group: The soft and beautiful heart of people who can spend time for something else but they close their eyes of their personal life, their personal problems” and dedicate time to this project, even though they get “nothing for themselves, not like making money or be famous or anything like that. They make fantastic job to educate people about the wrong thing in this country. So that was good for me to learn and also to meet more people who is in my side.”

Of the experience more generally, they said:

- That they had “control.” “Whatever I want to tell, whatever, they want to know. No, I never had any pressure or anything.”
- “It was a really great experience.” It was new, “through the story I learned how important it was to share my story, I learned a lot about writing and I learned a lot about sharing stories so it was really a wonderful experience.” This was despite the fact that Manus Island “wasn’t a place to learn, it wasn’t a place to grow because the intention was cruel.”

-
- “I shared what I wanted to share and Michael sent me the whole story before it was published and I checked it and I was happy about it. So I was in control of my story... I wouldn't want to change it [if given the chance to do it again]. Because I was happy about the story.”
 - It was “totally” a positive experience, and an “emotional” one.
 - One woman felt she had control over the interview and what was published, and that she would have been comfortable to tell Michael what she wanted included or excluded, there was no pressure.
 - “They've done everything by the book, Behind the Wire, they sent me all the explanations of the project, they've met me in person, explained it to me. And they also gave me the options whether I want to withdraw from this project.”
 - “Behind the Wire was very good. So they had this balance and they approached people in a right way, in a proper way. They work with people in right way”. They didn't “bother” participants too much with updates on what was happening with the project. But they provided the right kinds of information and had good “principles” and “they had this balance how to share information with people and how to work with people, and they didn't put people in danger or they didn't create problem” by forcing people to share information or their names. There was no “pressure” and they “didn't create risk”. It was clear that they care about “privacy” but they didn't worry too much.
 - Behind the Wire were “patient” and good at “communicating to us, it was fantastic everything that was happening. They've been emailing us every step by step, what's happening, what they're doing, what's the next step. They made sure we're comfortable with it.” She didn't feel “pushed to do anything.”
 - “It was all respectful.”
 - “All these things that made me be scared [before participating] is going away one by one.”
 - Everything was “perfect.”
 - It provided an opportunity to share his unique voice.
 - “It was fantastic.”
 - One participant also reflected on how they would do it differently if they had the chance again: “I should have wrote before I tell, and then read it again, and [see] how it feels and how I think about the story. So that's the experience that I have. So I should have read it, write it and then read again.” This was because “when they published the book, and I read it I think I read and I was like ‘oh, I feel I could have changed that.’” There were things that he would change if he had his time again, or if there was another edition, in particular going deeper on some aspects.. But this also creates problems, because “if I change it then I don't know if people will think something else like ‘how he's making the stories and blah blah’... it's a little bit hard.”

Expectations, opportunities and surprises

Participants discussed the new opportunities that arose as a result of participating:

- When participating in a live interview for the first time, “I was scared at the beginning of the live interview. It was my first time, and all the audience - And it was great.” André provided information about what would happen every step of the way.
- It meant that they could be known in Australia, even if they could never come here: “Even though I didn't go to Australia there are thousands of people who have read my writing, so then I saw that I don't have to go to Australia to be known as a writer in Australia. My writing is all over Australia.” To know that his writing has been read in Australia, “it is a kind of feeling that can't be bought.”
- It provided an opportunity to “see things differently, you know, so it was a very important project.”

-
- It enabled one participant to see that others had similar experiences, and to change their attitude to their own experiences. Through both reading the stories of, and meeting, the other people in the project "I changed my mind of being positive. I used to be not negative or not depressed but I was very tired on that time, I just wanted to do something new and I wasn't able to study and work on that time so everything was very not clear to me. And when I read about other stories I thought 'oh, because people who have the same experience and they are living in different ways, so why I, shouldn't I change my way and why is that the way that I think and start a new life that I've been given."
 - Got to meet other people, including people in the media and people working on other projects: "Every project, every connection teaches you a lot of experience, how to interact with people and then how to handle future projects and you learn from the mistakes that you make."
 - Through the project a "connection" is created between people inside detention and outside, and people were able to feel part of a larger community. There was a clear difference in Manus Prison between people who participated and people who didn't, and the connections that they felt.
 - There was the opportunity to participate in an exhibition in Wellington and be part of a panel discussing Behind the Wire.
 - It felt like an "achievement" to be part of this project. And providing her story while being anonymous meant that she can share her story without anyone "feel[ing] sympathy for me, empathy or feedback for me or give excuse if I one day, if I made a mistake or one day if I'm not doing my job well or whatever... If I'm doing a great job I want to be recognised as, you are like [she]'s doing a fantastic job, and she's great at it without thinking 'oh my god this girl has been like through this and that and look at her now."
 - It provided the opportunity to share his story and to get more confidence in sharing it in other spaces, such as Twitter.
 - It provided the possibility of "targeting three groups in a row. One is targeting the audience in Australia, the second also targeting my fellow refugees, those who are not coping with the situations... and then the third platform for me, it's for myself personally, getting my dignity back because I've been referred to as a number and my trying to convince myself that 'no I'm not a number, I am Aziz who grew up with his grandmum and the Aziz who had hope and aspirations and dreams and I don't allow the system to kill my aspirations and my hopes and my dream and I will achieve them."

Participants expressed how meaningful participation was:

- "It gave me a purpose to survive when I was there" on Manus Island.
- "Creating art" helps to "create some meaning and so for people who are living under systematic torture, sharing their story helps them psychologically and helps them to keep their identity and humanity." "So just compared to people who do nothing inside the prison camp, so it's very different because people who do something actually are creating, and this creating and being a part of a process like this helps them to find some meaning and helps them to survive because they keep their identities. You know because the system is designed to reduce people to some numbers. And so that's why I think it's important."
- There was a freedom in participating, the freedom to do what they wanted with the "platform or space."
- The book has parallels with other books written from prison: "When I was in Manus like 2015 and 14, I used to read the, I [got from] Michael, Nelson Mandela books and I used to read how he survived in jail for twenty six years and then he became a president and blah blah blah so, it's helped me a lot, yeah, it's helped me a lot to copy and to be strong and just, you know, keep fighting."
- The book helped others in detention: "I think it helped them to stay strong and don't give up you know."

- Participating in The Messenger provided a platform that “will help you to concentrate on what is going to happen to you in the next couple of days but at the same time also will protect you from the system, will protect you completely from the system and the protection that we’re talking about not necessarily need to be like physically or financially or trying to be there for you but no, they are there for me in a psychological way where, like, I put something on my mind that before even I sleep that I know what I have to do tomorrow. Or what I know what I have to do after tomorrow. So that’s how the Behind the Wire works, and protections work, I mean.”
- Participating in Behind the Wire meant that “self-pity” went away, they felt “like I’m just getting stronger.”
- Participating helped to (re)develop a sense of self, a sense of their own humanity by calling people by their names, rather than their boat numbers, as allocated by authorities: “One of the interesting experiences in the Behind the Wire project was that every single day when Michael sent me a voice [message] he said my name. He didn’t send me a voice [message] by saying QNK002 or BRF but he said ‘Aziz’. He kept repeating my name the whole time that we were sending messages back and forth and it’s just helped me to even use that name. Because all we are used to it, even with our friends we are just using the codes like ‘QNK BRF MEG’. We are using the numbers so we took over the dehumanisation. When Michael kept calling me ‘Aziz, Aziz’ at one point I felt even annoyed, like ‘why is he calling me ‘Aziz Aziz’ every time?’ and then I remembered ‘oh wow, it’s my name’. Then every time someone called me ‘QNK’, I said, ‘no Aziz, call me Aziz’ and I started calling people by their names.

Participants described the longevity of the project:

- **They Cannot Take the Sky** provided “a good amount of information and documentation” and will still exist for future generations to read and understand what happened on Manus Island.
- **The Messenger** provided an example for future generations. It also provided an opportunity to be an example to others in detention, to share their stories.

Thoughts on the book

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about what the book provided:

- “It was a great place to share my story and my hope was fulfilled.”
- It provided a space outside the mainstream media for sharing stories.
- It enabled those who were writers to write their stories and through that to try to change things.
- “What I like about the book is because it’s written and it’s always there so any time I want to remember my experience or my memory I just go and read the book and other experiences.”
- They were proud of the book as it’s more accessible than artwork that they’ve done, it’s more easily understood. Additionally, “I’m very proud of what I’ve done because I think that the book is something that everyone can read and even my kids, when they grow, I have something to show them that I’ve done this.”
- People who had participated in the book, and could see it, wanted to participate in other projects.
- It is accessible for all ages.
- “I was so proud and happy to see” the book.
- A physical book is very good because it doesn’t disappear like something on the internet, and you can share it around.
- “I was happy to see myself in the book, I’ve never been in a book. [It was] very exciting like a famous man, a very important man.... Yeah, I think it’s more than make me happy I used to say ‘wow I’m famous’, I used to tell my friends ‘I’m not like you guys, I’m a famous because I’m in the book.’”

Participants reported on their experience of reading the book:

- The book contains lots of stories of people with different experiences, so it was “fascinating.”
- “It was very interesting after we finished the project and I read other stories I was very impressed of the different stories because we all came by boat, actually same trip, I mean same way. But every person has different story which was very interesting and [makes] that book, so same [copy] but every person has had different story of their experience.”
- It was good to see that “it wasn’t focusing on one typical story” but shared lots of stories.
- “You just want to keep reading it.”
- It provided an opportunity to learn about one’s roommates, and learn their histories.

Participants mentioned feedback that they heard from people who have read the book:

- People appreciated the book because they learned so much from it: “They couldn’t find any comparison between the information that they had from the media and the information that they received from the book because it was, there was no comparison at all. That’s why it was very surprising for them to have that book in their hand. And the book allowed them to know a lot about our lives.”
- For someone, when they showed the book to other people in Manus Prison, others felt “encouraged to share their stories.”
- “Definitely it had an impact in Australia and many people read this book.”
- One participant was anonymised in the book, and some of her friends at university read the book and shared it, but didn’t know she was in it, and didn’t know her story of how she came to Australia and what had happened to her before: “And seeing them sharing the book in their Facebook, Instagram and how that book is let them change ‘cause not everybody will be courage to share their ideas because they don’t know how I came, so they won’t tell me what they’re thinking actually about that people who’s coming by boat, knowing that they had a different idea and once they read the book they let them change their mind, and some of them, like, they were like, scared about the people coming and then reading that, knowing that they had reasons to come... Actually some of them, they send me like ‘you got to read this book’. I’m like ‘okay I’ll read it’... Knowing they’re reading these books and other people reading it and it was mind blowing for me. I was like ‘wow it happened’ like I didn’t imagined it will reach to my friends, like the people I study with or like, the people I work with and, and I had even this old lady who like, you know, some old people like, it’s very hard to change their minds. And then when she’s sitting next to me in the staff room and then she had that book in her hand and then she [said] ‘oh we are very thankful that we weren’t go through this’ and I like ‘yeah you never know what people going through’ and she said ‘yeah, you gotta read this book’ and I’m like ‘yes, I read that book it’s amazing’ and even seeing people, I actually saw like few times people in the train reading that book and I’m like ‘yes, yes’. That was the things that I didn’t even imagine it will happen. I was like ‘oh people will read it, people will change’ but I didn’t think I’ll see it happen.”
- One participant talked about people on Manus who borrowed the book from him: “So whoever borrowed my book they said ‘it’s a nice book so it’s nice to knowing you’ they said ‘we know you more now before it’s like’. You see in my community we are from Sudan but we are from different part of Sudan so when I mention all the details where I am from, even my community they get know more who I am. You see, so it’s similar whoever borrow my book they get [to] know more about me, more about my history yeah I think that’s additional information for them to knowing somebody who exactly who he is and why he or she coming from... It’s very important, yeah.” He said it was good for him to know that they knew him a bit better.

-
- One participant was worried that people who read the book would just “feel sorry” for the people whose stories were in it: “I don’t want anybody feel sorry for me okay. I want you to read my story to be stronger and come to the road, join with other people and asking government ‘shut the detention centre’. I don’t want you as a female to crying for me because I was forty days or more than that or sometimes less in on hunger strike. [That time’s gone] you cannot take it back, I cannot take it back all right. We have to stop those policy to other people who still in the same situation or even worse.” He clarifies further that the book “is really good political statement, okay, but my problem is the people who reading this okay... they going to wrong way. The wrong way is feel sorry for Ali [last name] because he was four and a half years in detention centre, he charged with this amount of money for the time he - no this is wrong, I don’t want you.”
 - One participant said that the process was quick: “I would just describe it as very fast. They just came to me and I read through it and I was like ‘it’s fine,’ sent it back to him and then soon after he was like ‘oh here is the book by the way’ he just sent it to me I think, uh, it was through Janet... Yes, so Janet came to Manus Island and was like ‘oh... this is the book!’ Time goes very fast on Manus Island for some reason, I don’t know why but time goes very fast.”
 - One participant reported that they appreciated the energy that Behind the Wire put into making sure that the book was widely distributed: “It meant they respect the stories in the book. They respect these people’s life and I believed what they saying that they want people to read the stories. I thought it was like just be on online putting the book online and all of that, I didn’t expect all that much effort to make sure it was going to every place, you know, every house. It meant a lot, it meant, it meant a lot to see them really putting that work and that time in it. It was good, yeah.”

Participating in the exhibition

Participants were positive about the exhibition:

- “It was pretty good.”
- The exhibition provided the opportunity for visitors to the Immigration Museum to “see these stories of moving images of asylum seekers and refugees which they are not some puppet, which they are not something on television which people have been paid to act. But they are real human beings living breathing laughing crying human beings who come and share their stories, open their heart to the rest of the world so people would understand, people would empathise with them, and people would see the journey through their own eyes and ears and it touched them in their heart. So the visual storytelling was quite powerful, was strong. I know a lot of people that I was giving talk in Immigration Museum, people cry and a couple of people who came as migrants refugees they cried there in front of me and they said that they have been through the journey as well and this is first time that they feel that they are not alone.”
- It provided another way for people to connect with refugees and asylum seekers.

Participants were positive about their experience of being part of the exhibition:

- Visitors, including school groups, asked “interesting questions” and people asked questions about what Australians can do: “So it was a bit positive.”
- It was an opportunity to meet other people with similar experiences, to build connections with other people who had been in detention.

Wanting people to know about who refugees are and their stories

Participants reported that they were eager to participate in order to share with the public what being a refugee, and being in detention, meant:

- This project gave them control over what the story they told would be, unlike when working with a journalist.
- “I really wanted to share my experience and let people know about us and tell them about how we are and give them the right picture of asylum seeker.”
- Provides a way for people in detention in Manus, a “remote island” to not be “out of sight, out of mind”, creates “awareness.”
- It was a way of speaking back to people who support locking up refugees.
- “This work is important because at least we recorded a part of, you know, how life is inside the prison camp and also it’s important for the language, that we change the language and perspective towards the refugees.”
- “So it was kind of, for me also, a way to give back to the community, change people’s mind because you never know, what if even one book, that one book one person in the family read it, could talk to other people in the family and that could pass a message to their friends, to their relatives, ‘oh did you read that book? Did you know these people are not here to harm us? They’ve been through a lot, they just want a safe house, like four walls and they sleep at night without hearing gun shots or whatever it is’ so that was the best idea of the book.”
- “I’m here to show you I’m here to build your country with you. People will see that and that time they will know you are not here to harm... the book was good for me to enter their houses in a nice gentle way without I force myself on them.” This was meant quite literally. Participating in the book gave her the courage to say hello to new neighbours and make friends with them. As a result, she realised that she and her neighbours had things in common, they shared migration and other stories, and they caught public transport together: “If I didn’t do that I would miss this opportunity to getting to know my neighbours.
- It was a way to tell the truth when politicians don’t.
- Behind the Wire helped to shift public opinion, the book was an opportunity to reach out to people and invite them to “change your perspective.”

Being happy with how their story was told

Across the board, participants were happy with how their story was told and the ongoing effects of telling their story:

- “It had a great impact on my life when I was there” in Manus Island.
- “[pseudonym] is the hero that I made.”
- Participating in this project “helped me in the next project for sure.” It helped to figure out how to keep telling their story.
- “They taught me how to take care and value my story. And if I’m going to share my story again or like someone else’s story I would know how to respect it and how to make sure they feel comfortable and safe. They taught me that part and I thought I was like just ‘yes’ I say ‘yes’ and that’s it, you give your [word], but then the respect I felt and the love and the caring they showed it to me it’s not just about a book, it’s just caring and taking care of the people who will represent this book.”
- They were happy that it meant that they could reach more people across the world.
- Telling their story in this way, being part of this project, provided hope while in detention.

Telling friends and family about participation

Many respondents reported telling their family about their participation:

- “They were pretty happy” to see their family member’s story.
- Even when family members didn’t fully understand the project they were still proud and happy to see the book.
- One person reported that after telling their family about it their brother bought a copy and took it to school and showed it around.
- Michael shared a copy of the book with someone’s family: “They were very happy”. “I remember my mum filmed my grandma seeing the book and then she started crying and then she saw my picture in there and was like ‘oh is this [participant’s name], is it actually him like in this book?’ and then she started crying. I saw that, that was one of the moments that I will not forget. And then she read some of the paragraph to her and then she was even more crying... My grandma seeing her grandson making a change, getting involved and having his words published in a book, that made her very emotional and that would give me a feeling of approval.”
- One respondent said that he didn’t tell his family “because you know I don’t use to tell about situation here because we were very rough situation and if I tell that situation maybe my mum will get worried about it and you know I always hiding what exactly going on... but one day I will tell them.”

What was learned through participating in this project

Participants reported a variety of lessons:

- That they would tell their story slightly differently next time.
- One respondent said that they learned new things about their experience, about how it’s always going to be part of them, it’s not something which you can “close in a box.”
- Another respondent said that it helped them see other people’s experiences, and so to understand their own experience in a new perspective: That they had been in detention for 8 months, but others had been in there for many years.
- They realised that it made them stronger.

Interest in participating in other projects, including their work in archives or speaking to a royal commission

All participants were eager to work on other projects, seeing the practice of telling their story as an ongoing one. Most people liked the idea of a royal commission or an inquiry, although one participant said that the materials Behind the Wire produced are not appropriate for a royal commission or inquiry as “they don’t care about these works because these works are art, are literature, are in a different context and they need fact not stories.”

- One participant indicated that he would like to give a TED Talk: “‘Behind the Wire’ was the first step, to get in”
- The desire to keep telling his story was because people need to hear, but also because he “just need... I always want to, I always want to tell stories, of myself to people and then also I like to tell what happened with me and this was my history. What was my past so I’m innocent. I want to tell them. And then you never know and there will be a film of ‘They cannot take the sky!’”
- Telling these stories also provides a space to imagine a different future, where detention is part of a distant past.
- Another participant indicated that he would like to be in a movie or documentary, telling people’s stories.

-
- Even if there's no organised project, some people would keep finding ways to tell their story.
 - Telling the story again and again is a way to keep it in the minds of future generations
 - One participant said "yeah definitely 'cause it will again help to raise more awareness and then more importantly it is gonna give us a lot of information in our data bank about something that happened that wasn't right and we need to be more aware of"
 - Telling the stories "is a political act" that should keep going.
 - While all were enthusiastic, that enthusiasm had different levels, with some being "a hundred percent" interested, and others saying they would want their story used only by people who they trust and if they were comfortable with the project.
 - One participant said "absolutely. I'm happy for them to use my story, not only my story but personally also I want to be part of it. I want to be there and to stand up in front of all the Commissioners to tell that 'this is what happened.'"

Involvement in other projects

Some of the participants are involved in other projects with journalists, and one person reported working with GetUp. One reported that they are involved in numerous other projects but Behind the Wire is "unique". Participating in Behind the Wire for one person was a way to get them more active on Twitter.

Problems or issues that were raised in the interviewing process

One participant explained that he asked for a pseudonym to be used, but instead his real name was used. He said "I don't mind, don't really mind". It happened, he thinks, because it wasn't clear that the document he saw was the final version that was going to be published, so he was slightly surprised to see his real name on his chapter. He would have used a pseudonym to "protect myself" and to avoid getting into "trouble". But on the other hand, having his name there meant that he was public, and it has enabled him to remain public and take opportunities to speak publicly: "So I don't mind if they put it in my name, It's a great thing for me... I don't mind as long as the government don't then chase me up."

Another participant said that there were no problems but it is an emotional thing to have been part of: "Every time I want to talk about it or anyone asks me about the book or the story I become very emotional and I remember everything of the time that I spent doing the project, or even how I felt on that time and why I said that, why I didn't say that and really it's very long conversation between myself and thinking about it."

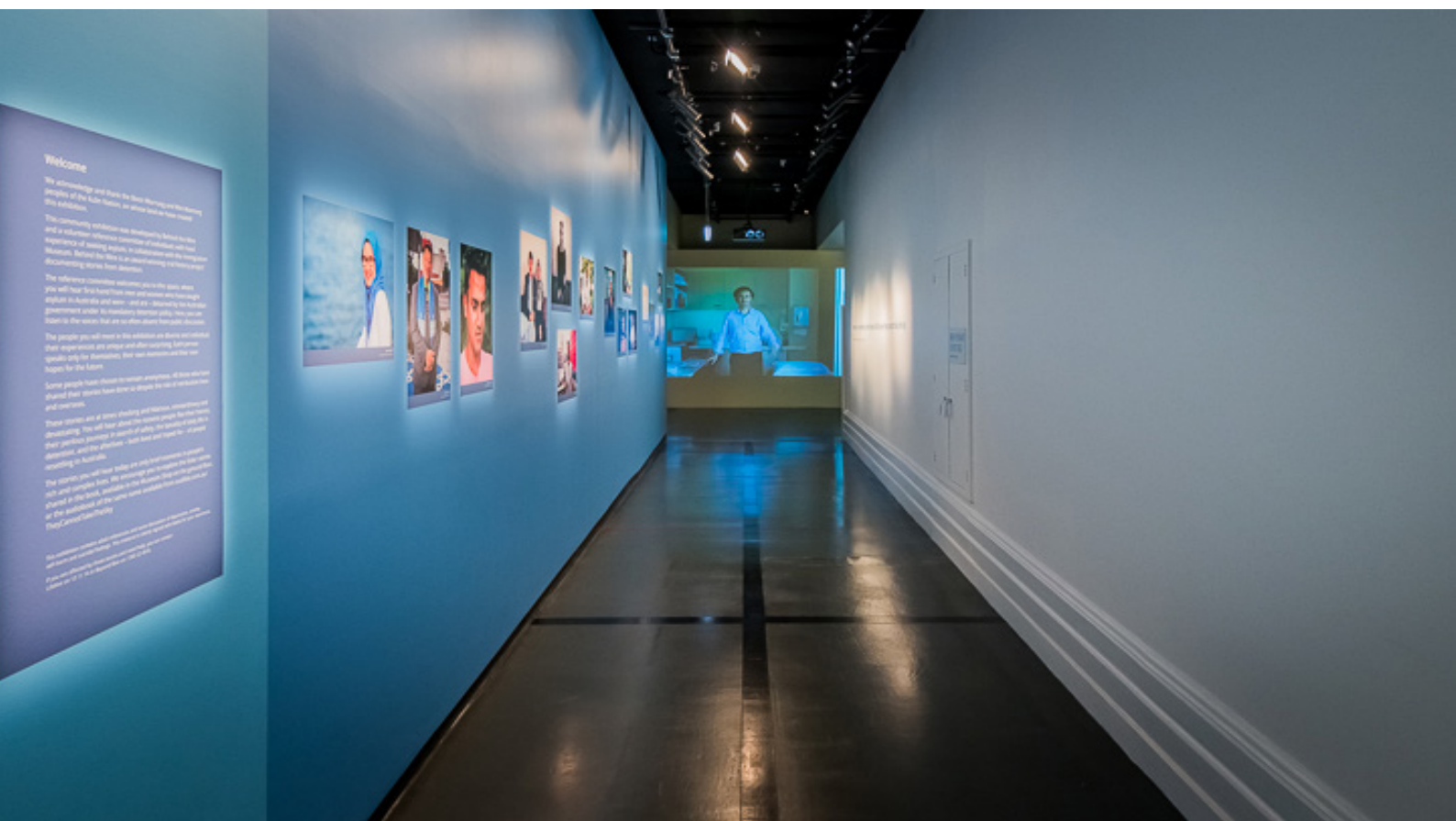
One participant who also acted as an interviewer on Manus Island reported that it was difficult to find people to interview, and there's a lot of mistrust, and a lot of people have had bad experiences with the media. There is also the problem of people being "vulnerable" and worrying about what may happen to them if they share their stories.

Aspects the interviewee would change about the process

Overwhelmingly, participants said that there was nothing that they would change. There were a lot of positive comments in response to this question: "It is perfect"; "I wanna say it was pretty great"; "I think they did their best."

But there were a few suggestions:

- One participant said that they would have liked to hear more feedback from Australia.
- That it would be good for Behind the Wire to continue this work, there's more to be done.
- "One of the low points that I could say, sometimes when back in the days when I was in the detention I wasn't in the mood to talk, I wasn't in the mood to talk and then switching on my phone I just see like a float of message, that come from the podcast and what I said to myself like 'oh my God, like give me break, like I don't have'. You know, but I never get to a point that to express my frustrations on that voice message but I will try and hide it, hide my frustration so by just staying away from my phone, keep my phone in my room and not replying to the message on the same day but replying to them on the next day, by using the word like 'I'm sorry for the delay' but no further explanation."
- There's a need to be more involved with people who have left detention, to reach out to them and include them.



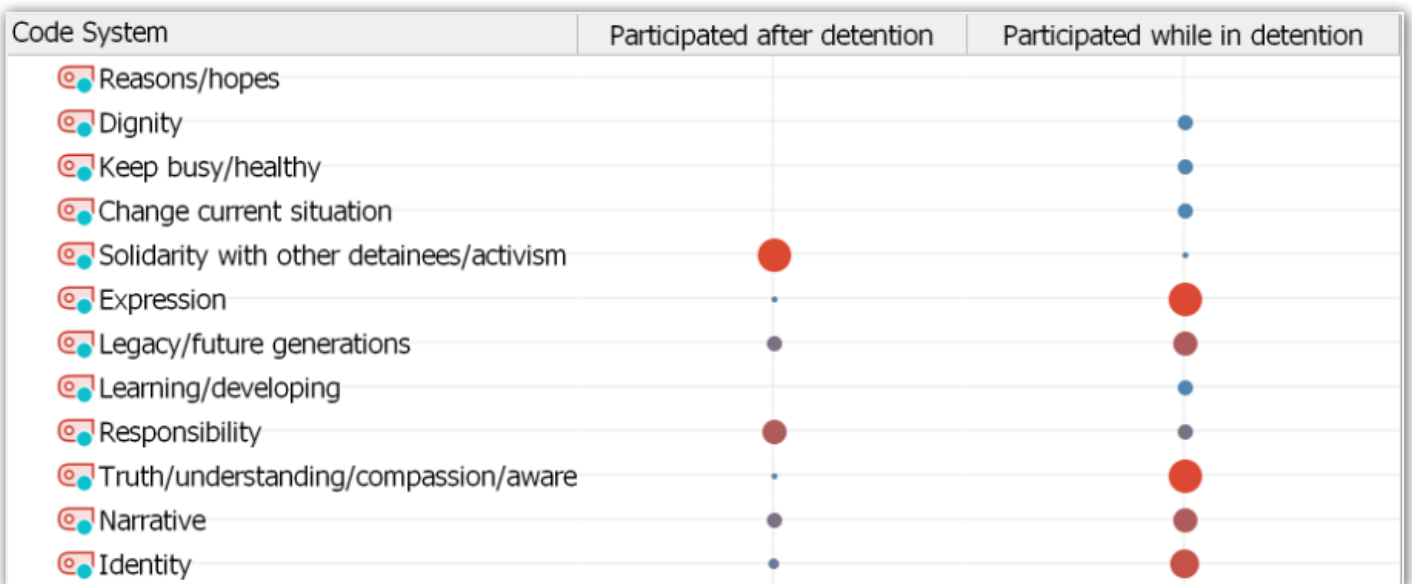
PART TWO

Introduction

Behind the Wire collected stories about detention from people who, at the time of participating, had been released from detention as well as from people who were still in detention. This study interviewed people from both groups, finding that the experience of participating in Behind the Wire differed between the groups. In other words, Behind the Wire seemed to hold particular meanings for people who were out of detention and for those who were still subjected to it whilst participating in the project. We thought it would be interesting to study this in more detail. In this second part of the report, we describe the process we have engaged in to explore these differences and discuss our most salient findings.

We have analysed the interview material using the method of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019).¹ Using a tool called 'The Code Matrix Browser (CMB)', found within MAXQDA (a qualitative coding software), interesting patterns between the two groups could be examined and analysed. Out of this process we have found two realms that were of most interest to us: a) the reasons why people agreed to participate and b) the effects their participation had on them and their lives. Each section will feature a code matrix² to visualise these patterns followed by a discussion of them.

Reasons to participate



1 This form of analysis involves an iterative process of coding, where the codes are not set from the start, but emerge and evolve throughout the process. Braun and colleagues (2019) conceptualise themes as meaning-based patterns, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways, and as the output of coding (p. 848).

2 The Code Matrix Browser is constructed as follows: The two document sets (participated after and while in detention) are listed in the columns and codes are listed in the rows. The circles at the conjunction points represent the number of coded segments that are coded with a particular code. The larger the circle, the more coded segments are assigned to the code in question.

The size of the coloured dots in the table above reflects the number of times we assigned a particular code to material in interview transcripts. Thus, for example, 'Solidarity with other detainees/activism' and 'Responsibility' featured particularly prominently in our analysis of the interviews with those who participated in Behind the Wire after release from detention. Meanwhile, 'Expression', 'Truth/understanding/compassion' and 'Identity' were more frequently coded in the interviews with those who were still detained when they shared their stories for Behind the Wire.

Across the board, all participants were driven by a commitment to speak truth about detention, to raise awareness and understanding. They wanted to address the misrepresentation of refugees in politics, media and mainstream culture and shape the narrative with stories that do justice to their lived experiences and identities. It is worth mentioning that even though almost everyone mentioned the need to generate understanding, compassion and awareness, for those detained this was heavily emphasised and spoken about in terms of the urgency to expose the truth.

The following two sections describe unique reasons each of the two groups expressed for participating in Behind the Wire. They highlight the deliberate and thoughtful purposes behind people's consent to share their stories.

People participated to affirm their existence and try to enact change

There are a few reasons that stand out and are unique to the people who participated while detained. They talked about taking any opportunity they had to change the situation they were in. This was a situation they described as inhumane ("**The treatment was not humane at all and I thought by making this awareness there will be a change**"). Their answers suggest that taking part in Behind the Wire provided them with a chance to take action in light of so many human rights abuses ("**To tell people that we are stuck here and we are suffering here**"). In sharing their stories, they sought to raise awareness about their predicaments which in turn could contribute to affecting change towards better conditions or even freedom ("**We must speak out about our situation, people can help us, people can react positively. People can put more pressure on the government to do something**"). These actions countered the silencing of refugees that the remoteness and isolation of offshore detention, among other strategies, intends to achieve. For some it was making 'every effort' to undermine the 'out of sight, out of mind' tactics of Australian border politics. This was not described in grand terms. People knew their contributions and subsequent effects were 'tiny', yet they were significant because they opposed the harm inflicted on them by the 'system'. They maintained the critical approach for which they had been persecuted in their homelands ("**I fled persecutions because I did not agree with so many things. In here I'm not going to allow this system to detain me and tell me what to do and what not to do. I'm going to make changes. I know I'm just one single human being against a whole continent and their government but I believe I can do my part**").

It was also about creating new options as the ones presented to them were unacceptable ("**Going back home is not an option for me and I'm left with the option to die, get killed or rot in this centre. I don't think that's what I want and I don't think that's the only way**"). The extent to which this involved mental fortitude is demonstrated by the resolve people had to take back control and not succumb ("**I told myself 'I can sit down and let my mind control me and be mentally destroyed and pretty much lose everything or I can control my mind and control so many things around me**"). Exercising this power and feeling this sense of control seemed to be very profound to some ("**At least I felt like I'm having control over and that was that was enough for me**" - "**They were like 'in here they**

will tell you when to eat, when to sleep, when to do what and where to go and you're closed' but I was like 'I don't think so, I think there's stuff that I have control over and I can do them and I will do them'. And I did. Even though I was limited, I still managed to do a lot").

Connected to taking back control, was the intention of people to keep themselves busy ("Something that will keep me busy at the same") and sane ("I'm just looking for a way that could keep me active twenty-four seven because I don't want to end up having a mental problem or end up hanging myself or cutting myself"). Being busy and psychologically sane were, again, ways to defy the system ("I was thinking to myself 'look, now I have something to do and also I will be so strong that the system will not break me down' because the intention of the systems, the system want to break people down"). For one person, Behind the Wire even represented protection from the system ("Once I was involved with the Messenger, I realised how powerful it is to have a platform. Even like for a short period of time that platform will help you to concentrate on what is going to happen to you in the next couple of days and at the same time also will protect you from the system. The protection that we're talking about is not necessarily physically or financially or trying to be there for you, no they are there for me in a psychological way"). Having a purpose and tasks seemed to shield them from the psychological harm inflicted ("I put something on my mind before going to sleep; I know what I have to do tomorrow or what I have to do after tomorrow so that's how Behind the Wire works").

The sort of control they were exercising allowed them to preserve their personhood ("So, I'm trying to have a balance and control over my brains, like the way I think. Rather than just letting people to think [what they want] about me and let people offer me what they want me to do, I want to think [for myself] and have that independency"). Critical and independent thinking was here a mental act of resistance and the Behind the Wire project was for some an opportunity to think and exercise the mental control and resistance connected to thinking critically and independently ("Not physically but mentally, that's what I was looking for and the Behind the Wire gave me that independency"). The consequences of fostering such mental abilities should not be underestimated ("Which is psychologically and it's helped me a lot, even to overcome many, many, many problems that I have faced since I've become involved with them"). Against a system designed to do the opposite, they reclaimed their identity and dignity ("If I could approach people with a positive message, that message will get the attention of people and they will realise. Rather than just saying 'Aziz is a refugee or like a refugee,' they will refer to me as Aziz and that's what I was looking for, getting my dignity back"). From this vantage point, participating in a project like Behind the Wire was a deliberate effort on behalf of the participants to humanise their existence again. In the section on effects, we will come back to the humanising and dignifying outcomes Behind the Wire had for people detained indefinitely in offshore prisons. It is fitting to conclude this section by amplifying this profound quote:

“It was also a platform for me. I was personally [getting my dignity back](#) because I've been referred to as a number and my trying to convince myself that 'I'm not a number, I am Aziz that who grew up with his grandmum and who had hope and aspirations and dreams and I don't allow the system to kill my aspirations and my hopes and my dream and I will achieve them.' That's how I was doing this for myself. If you ask me to rephrase the goal of the project, I will say 'the goal of project is to humanise people; to give people humanity; to tell people 'your dignity is yours, it's one of the valuable things, fight for it! Here is the platform, speak.'”

People participated to speak up for those who are not free and safe yet

Several of the people who were living in the community at the time of the project wanted to share their stories in Behind the Wire because they wanted to help those still detained (“Another reason why we talked is the people in Manus and Nauru, because we’re really sad for them. We knew how hard life is for them and we really wanted people to know about them. We are totally safe now but they are not safe” - “So people can take action against the government and change the situation for the better for those who come to Australia, Europe, America or anywhere. That was the point”). Some people witnessed the deterioration of the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees and felt inclined to respond. Even though they were aware of the odds they were up against, they still believed it was important to act (“A project like this is like a drop in the ocean... but it is important because if we have thousand drops it becomes a bucket. If we have ten thousand drops it become ten buckets and if we have hundred thousand of these drops it will become, you know, a swimming pool. There was a quote I remember, it says ‘life is not destroyed by those who does an evil thing but by those who sits around and do nothing’. Life is destroyed by that. The world is destroyed by them. So, this, this was a drop that I can contribute to this debate”). Their actions were deeply meaningful to them, regardless of the results or the consequences for them (“To show the reality of this situation even if it’s to one person, it’s important” - “I’ve been bashed by police in demonstrations, but I’m not sure anything can stop me”).

This solidarity was fuelled by a great sense of responsibility (“I wanted to do as my part of giving back to the society, giving back to fellow asylum seekers and refugees who fled their war-torn countries”). Some emphasised how important it has been for them to stand up against injustices and not remain passive (“I didn’t want to sit around, I wanted to be proactive, I wanted to take part” - “We were fighting for a better life for everyone, we didn’t sit at home and do nothing and wait for governments around the world to do what they want with refugees and asylum seekers people. That’s why I wanted to be involved with that book” - “It’s important to not be silent. While people are silent, others get abused by their governments in every single country and this is wrong”).

One person also remembered and wanted to honour the activism that was done on his behalf while he was detained (“I don’t need to fight for myself anymore but I have to tell you one more thing. While I was in the detention centre from 2000 to 2004 more than thousand Australian people fought for my freedom. Even though they didn’t know me at all because I came from different country. I didn’t know anybody in this country, I didn’t have any family, I didn’t have any relatives, I didn’t have any friends. When I get released that was my responsibility to give back. I will never forget this. I cannot close my eyes and put a mask on my ears and say ‘dude, I’ve never seen anything, I’ve never heard anything.’ No, I still remember every single person who was fighting for my freedom and now it is my job to fight for other people’s freedom. This is my responsibility”).

Strikingly, a few people had been human rights activists for long parts of their lives and considered their participation in Behind the Wire as a continuation of this (“In fact, it’s been nearly two decades now that I have been active. I’ve been taking part in this idea of a fair society where asylum seekers and refugees have their basic human rights protected” - “I’m human right activist and when I said human right activist, I include every human not only refugees and asylum seekers. This is my passion... I’m fighting for freedom for people not for myself”).

It is important to emphasise that this solidarity was grounded in participants' own lived experiences of the system. There was a deep commitment to prevent other people experiencing the pain and struggles they had gone through ("For five years, when I went through it, I was not allowed to study English, I was not allowed to go to higher education, I was not allowed to find a job, I was not allowed to find housing. There wasn't any family sponsorship. All this was really unfair and I don't want future asylum seekers and refugees to suffer as I suffered. I've been through all this hardship and I don't want people to go through that ever again" - "Because I'm not feeling sorry for myself. I feel sorry for other people who are going through the system and I want to stop the system that puts people through it").

It was underscored that participants were sharing their stories on behalf of those whose voices are not able to be heard. For many people, it is dangerous or impossible to speak up ("I want the citizens to hear that side of this story as well. I can connect to those asylum seekers and refugees and I tell them what their pains are because some of those people they are on Bridging Visa they have no right to speak to media, they have no right to speak to journalists, they have no right to go on the news and say what their pains are. They cannot go to a MP. If they try to say something, they will be deported right away"). Someone mentioned that people's mental health is deteriorating because they are afraid of the consequences that speaking up might have for their case assessment by the Department of Immigration ("Because lots of refugees at the moment are scared to talk even to a psychologist, a counsellor or a psychiatrist. This is wrong").

Effects of participation

The table below shows that there were also differences between the two groups in terms of the prominence of certain codes related to the effects of participation. 'Feeling proud' and 'New opportunities' were coded more frequently for those participating in Behind the Wire after detention, while 'Empowering', 'Therapeutic/humanising', 'Being able to act' are examples of codes that were particularly prominent for those who shared their stories while still in detention.



In the first of the following sections, we look at how Behind the Wire enabled people to connect with others. Interestingly, this was mentioned as a significant effect by both groups even though these connections had different forms. In the last two sections, we consider the particular effects Behind the Wire had on those who are detained.

Behind the Wire allowed people to connect with others and to feel part of a community

For those outside of detention, participating created opportunities to connect with other people. They particularly valued meeting other participants and members of the communities when collaborating in exhibitions. For some this was the highlight of taking part in Behind the Wire (**“Meeting with my friends is the first thing that I really appreciate”** or **“It was extremely crucial for me because if it was just a video documentary and it was shown on the website, it means nothing because a lot of people won’t go on the website anyway so what’s point?”**). The platform Behind the Wire provided through speaking at exhibitions sometimes had quite significant ripple effects (**“Out of this I got an opportunity to speak to an author in the Immigration Museum and she introduced me to two books on storytelling. Now, I almost finished writing my memoir. For some of the talks I did, I’ve been paid and thus had a source of income. I wasn’t hoping for all this, it just happened, they were like side benefits”**). Project members selflessly investing their time and efforts in a shared goal generated for some a sense of solidarity that was very sustaining (**“It was good for me to meet more people who are on my side. When we are connected to more people we have more fighters for our cause”**). Strikingly, the intentions of project members were considered critical (**“And there is one thing behind it – they have soft and clean heart... All this makes me stronger. I have people next to me that I can trust hundred percent, that I can love as a human being hundred percent. They make my feelings stronger. And in the way I’m fighting, that’s enough for me. It might not be enough for lots of activists in Australia or around the world, but it’s a lot for me”**).

It bears mentioning that several people, both in and outside of detention, spoke about the effect of reading the other stories in the book ‘They Cannot Take the Sky’. For some, this helped them to feel less isolated and misunderstood (**“I thought my story was very different and no one had the experience that I had because I went through very difficult times”**), as well as helping them to gain a different perspective on their own circumstances (**“I changed my mind to being positive, I used to be not negative or depressed I was very tired then. When I read other stories, I thought ‘oh people have the same experience and they are living in different ways, so why I, shouldn’t I change my way and start a new life that I’ve been given.”**). For one person who remained anonymous in the project, the book gave them confidence to communicate with others and build relationships with their neighbours as they realised that their story could remain private (**“It gave me courage to communicate with others without being scared. Before the book, I thought people will know that I look different and that I came by boat when they look at me. But after the book, I realised they wouldn’t know and Melbourne is a multicultural city. All of that helped me also to build relationship with my neighbours. It helped a lot, it helped a lot”**).

For those detained whilst participating, the project meant being able to connect with others outside of detention. The traction that the project got, in turn, made it possible for participants to be invited on other projects and meet new people (**“The project actually helped me to get to know a handful of other people and through those people, I got involved with many other projects and then they connected me to so many other journalists and media and then so on and so forth”**). Several people talked about how the connections with project members turned into friendships and how valuable these were to them (**“It’s the relationships that’s most important”**). Significantly, these relationships sometimes allowed people to escape the dread of detention (**“After I got in touch with them,**

I never feel like I'm in detention. Because I get a message from them every day, I get their love and support and encouragements and I feel like my voice is reaching them and so I'm with them every day. I never felt like I'm in the detention camp").

For some, sharing one's story and receiving a response from people created a deep connection. Participating in projects like these have allowed people to make friends in Australia (**"I know that many of those people who were a part of this project or other projects have lots of friends and supporters and they are not strange in Australia").** Finding new connections is particularly significant for those who have lost so many relationships (**"You left your country, your place and your family and it is important that you make some connection and you feel like you belong to a new society and a new community").** The support people have felt because of the project is real. Some commented on how their participation gave them visibility, on Twitter for example, where followers interacted with them and responded on their behalf to trolls (**"Many people are bullying me and give very aggressive comments but I have a lot of people who replied to them because they already know who I am and how our situation is. They used to help me even on Twitter").**

Interestingly, the opportunity to make connections created a sense of belonging to a community that is deeply meaningful to people even if they now cannot actually be part of that community (**"That is very, very important. I can compare those refugees who were not part of this kind of project and didn't share their stories with those who did and made some connection with Australian people. It is very different; these people are now in a good position because they have feelings towards Australia. The interesting thing is that even though I am not in Australia and I am not going to Australia I still have strong feelings with the Australian society because I participated. I had the opportunity to contribute to the society and that's why I have a connection with Australia, which is strange").** The fact that this is possible despite Australian detention policies is significant to people (**"I think that is very significant that we mention that when these people go out to the community at least they know someone and they have a connection with Australia").** Some spoke about how the project offered them a different perspective on Australia because the project members showed respect, love and care towards them and valued their stories (**"It's not just about a book, it's taking care of the people who will be in this book. It was a powerful message too. The way they took care of us and our stories made me see the real Australia").**

Two things are important to note. Firstly, the mere fact of initiating a project like this held great meaning to some of the detained participants because of the extraordinary circumstances it took place in (**"Someone who put effort and time to come to an island, that pretty much tried to keep everyone away, to do this project was very, very valuable to me").** Secondly, a sense of belonging did not depend on the feedback people received but was generated by the mere fact of making a contribution (**"Even when you just share your story that create this connection. So, it's not that you necessarily get feedback directly from people. You know, when you contribute, when you feel that you share something with the society, that's what creates a connection").** According to one of the participants, we should understand those contributions as political acts (**"These works, we should understand them in the political context. Because the book 'They Cannot Take the Sky' or the audio project actually introduce refugees to the society and that is a political act. It is a political act because the government and some of the media portray the refugees as criminals.").** This underscores the power oral history and art projects can have (**"I think in the future these works can be used in a political way and they should be").**

Behind the Wire “humanised” detainees’ existence

In the section on reasons why people participated in Behind the Wire, it became clear that detained participants sought to reclaim their dignity and identity. In this section, we get a glimpse of how Behind the Wire met those expectations and hopes.

“One of the interesting experiences in the Behind the Wire project was that every single day when Michael sent me a voice [message] he said my name. He didn’t send me a voice [message] by saying QNK002 or BRF but he said ‘Aziz’. He kept repeating my name the whole the time that we were sending messages back and forth and it’s just helped me to even use that name. Because all we are used to it, even with our friends we are just using the codes like ‘QNK BRF MEG’. We are using the numbers so we took over the dehumanisation. When Michael kept calling me ‘Aziz, Aziz’ at one point I felt even annoyed, like ‘why is he calling me ‘Aziz Aziz’ every time?’ and then I remembered ‘oh wow, it’s my name’. Then every time someone called me ‘QNK’, I said, ‘no Aziz, call me Aziz’ and I started calling people by their names.

We don’t need to stick to a point where the system is saying to us ‘you are numbers you are that and you are this and you are there.’ No, we are not a number ‘you are Reza, I’m Ali, you are Behrouz, you are Benam, you are this person.” It has a great effect on me personally that I realised this. I have no idea how many people that I reached out to in Australia but today I feel there’s a wider community in Australia who knows exactly ‘who Aziz is”

When people are in a system that is determined to diminish their identities, a project that embodies respect and dignity can humanise people’s day-to-day life again and help them resist the effects of the system (“The system changed my identity from the day that I stepped into the country and the system even forced me at one stage [to act upon my inhumanity]. I mean if they ask you ‘what’s your number?’ and you say ‘QNK’ and then they ask you ‘what is the code?’ to which you say ‘kangaroo’, that’s how the system forces you to have it. Every day you wake up in the morning, that’s the first thing you are asked”).

Here, the simple act of using people’s names had the effect of countering the dehumanising practices that characterise Australian immigration detention. It is in the overall way project members engaged with people that humanity showed itself again. And the consequences of this were enormous.

“They were very, very strong connections and relationships that I had with the staff of Behind the Wire. Starting with André, going on to Michael and the sound producer, everyone who contributed on Behind the Wire. For me the most important thing was that everyone in that group of Behind the Wire treated me as a human being. I’ve been treated as a human and as one of them. That’s what makes me so excited and so strong. Despite all those years people in Australia still believe in me and treat me as a human. That means I’m a champion. I’m so grateful.”

One participant emphasised the importance of giving meaning to their existence whilst being subjected to systematic torture: “You know actually creating some kind of art always help people to create some meaning. For people who are living with systematic torture, sharing their story helps them psychologically. It helps them to keep their identity and humanity compared to people who do nothing inside the prison camp. It’s very different because people who do something are actually creating. Being part of a process like this help them to find some meaning and help them to survive because they keep their identities. Because the system is designed to reduce people to numbers, that’s why I think it’s important.”

So, the creative acts of working with stories and sharing reflections in Behind the Wire generated processes of meaning-making in which people could hold on to their humanity and identity. As we will see in the next section, the opportunity to create meaning had other important consequences.

Behind the Wire helped people survive and cope by giving them purpose and meaning

Whilst they were detained, people were looking for ways to express themselves and connect with others. Some even learnt English and how to read and write. For one participant, writing became their 'survival' ("**Learning writing and reading kept me alive when I was there because I didn't have anything to do.**"). It gave them 'a purpose to get out of bed and to start each day with a goal'. Some sought to share their experiences more broadly and were active on Twitter. For those people, Behind the Wire not only gave them a bigger platform ("**They made the platform possible for me, they gave me a chance to put my voice in that platform. To get that platform is not very easy**") but also purpose in times of despair and boredom ("**When they provide me that platform, they not only gave me the platform but they gave me even a purpose in life**"). This sense of purpose was not just in relation to the platform but to having something meaningful to do ("**I didn't really know what to do and I didn't know how to survive when I was there so all these projects gave me a purpose to survive when I was there**"). The significance of being part of helping someone find meaning in their existence and survival whilst they are indefinitely detained cannot be underestimated and it was seen by someone as one of the reasons why a project like Behind the Wire is important ("**Another part is how this work help the refugees and detainees to survive. They share their stories and they share a part of their lives. Actually, I understand it as an act of resistance. Just imagine someone is in prison on a remote island and is involved in a project like this. That definitely creates some meaning**").

As discussed previously, some participants were also keenly aware of the need to be active for their sanity and Behind the Wire helped them to find purpose in those actions ("**I said I would work with him because in some ways it gave me a purpose to survive when I was on Manus. You know, I woke up in the morning and I knew I had a project and I knew I had to work on that project. It gave me a purpose. There were hundreds of refugees who were highly depressed. They didn't know what to do because they didn't have any purpose**"). For those who experienced this sense of purpose, it was life-saving ("**They gave me purpose in my life. I was lost, a young man who's trapped in a cage and flooded with thoughts in my mind that come and go, come and go. I had no idea of where to go or what to do or even how to reach out to people and it was all just hard on my mind. Sometimes, I just wanted to stand there with self-pity and I thought about myself as a victim and just kept my mouth shut**"). This seemed to have a great impact on their self-esteem and their ability to cope with the situation ("**That's the sort of feeling that I used to have sometimes before I started with Behind the Wire. But the moment I started with Behind the Wire, that self-pity went away. I mean, looking at myself as a victim was just gone, it was just gone and I started feeling getting stronger every time I spoke**"). When a security guard commented on someone's positive outlook, they responded by affirming their renewed sense of identity ("**I'm not a victim, I'm a warrior in that I want to learn, I want to have a purpose in my life. And that's the purpose that Behind the Wire gave me**").



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participating in Behind the Wire projects was reported to have had a profound impact on most of those we interviewed. Key themes they highlighted were that participation represented a way of resisting 'the system'; participants experienced the process as meaningful and empowering; and the book, exhibition and podcast that were produced were seen as important, impactful and durable records of participants' experiences.


Defying and contesting the intent and impacts of Australia's immigration detention system appeared to be an important motivation for participation. The system tried to rob people of individual identity and make refugees invisible, often by holding them in locations which were inaccessible and/or far from the Australian mainland; while participating in Behind the Wire provided a means to reclaim visibility and identity (quite literally in some cases, by (re)substituting names for numbers). The system limited people's options and self-expression, and ascribed negative characteristics and narratives to asylum seekers by describing them as illegal and implying they were dangerous; while Behind the Wire gave participants an opportunity to tell their own stories and reject those narratives and imputed identities. Ultimately, the immigration detention system was designed to dehumanise, while participation in Behind the Wire recognised and asserted the humanity and individuality of each of those who participated.

The actual process of taking part in interviews, reviewing, and representing their stories was also extremely meaningful for participants. Those we spoke to described the process as giving them a purpose, and providing structure, meaning, and value to detention camp existence. It was an opportunity to be creative, to have authority, and to control how one's story was represented. The process was also experienced as one of 'being respected' and offering a way to gain perspective and integrate the detention experience into one's life story.

The book and exhibition, 'They Cannot Take the Sky', and the podcast, 'The Messenger', were also viewed positively by those we interviewed. They represented an important and durable record of the immigration detention regime and those incarcerated within it. They were seen as having an impact on the Australian public and their attitudes to those seeking asylum by increasing their knowledge about refugee experiences and portraying refugees as 'real human beings.' In this way, these outputs created a sense of connection between those who had been detained and the broader Australian community but also, and just as importantly, they created connections amongst refugees themselves and between refugees and advocates, whose efforts they appreciated. By representing the diversity of experiences of people who had sought asylum and been detained, the book, exhibition and podcast represented a way to be known and understood, of which those who participated were proud. As an oral history project, Behind the Wire is an exemplar of the power and value of having one's story heard, recorded and shared.

Limitations of this study

While participant experiences and views on Behind the Wire projects appeared to be overwhelmingly positive, it should be noted that we were only able to interview a small sample of all who contributed to the book and the exhibition. The fact that there was considerable reiteration and reinforcement by participants of the ideas and themes reported here suggests that these faithfully represent the common experience. It is also possible however, that those with positive feelings and memories of the project were more likely to agree to be interviewed by us and that we may have been less likely to hear about any negative experiences.



‘Around you, everything is metal fences. But the sky—they cannot take the sky’

Behrouz Boochani, in Manus Island Regional Processing Centre

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Sarah Strauven is a psychologist and narrative therapist. Specializing in refugee mental health and complex trauma, she worked alongside people seeking asylum for ten years. Sarah is currently a research fellow at Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (University of Melbourne) and conducts research across a number of trauma-impacted populations including people impacted by disaster and adversity. She has an interest in translational research that supports communities in their own recovery responses and increases access to systems of care for marginalised people. She also works in clinical practice.

Dr Jordana Silverstein is a Senior Research Fellow in the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness in the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne. A cultural historian, her work examines histories of statelessness in Australia, Australian child refugee policy, and Jewish community memories and meaning-making of the Holocaust. She is the author of *Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders* (Monash University Publishing, 2023) and *Anxious Histories: Narrating the Holocaust in Jewish Communities at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (Berghahn, 2015) and co-editor of *In the Shadows of Memory: The Holocaust and the Third Generation* (Valentine Mitchell, 2016) and *Refugee Journeys: Histories of Resettlement, Representation and Resistance* (ANU Press, 2021).

Associate Professor Karen Block is Associate Director of the Child and Community Wellbeing Program, Centre for Health Equity, in the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health and the Academic Convenor of the Anti-racism Hallmark Research Initiative. She is also the Deputy Director of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute where she leads their Migration and Mobility Research Program. Her recent and current research includes a range of projects involving immigrant and refugee-background young people, women and families focused on health inequalities, gender-based violence, anti-racism, evaluating complex interventions, and working in collaborative partnerships with communities and community-based organisations.

