

ARTICLES

MAKING THE STATE BLUSH

Humanizing Relations in an Australian NGO Campaign for People Seeking Asylum

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Abstract: The Australian state's hostile deterrence policy toward people arriving by boat who seek asylum evokes polarized public sentiments. This article, which ethnographically follows a humanitarian NGO campaign in the lead-up to the 2016 Australian election, examines how citizens who opposed deterrence sought to affectively and morally influence the state and the public. Building on anthropological theories of the state and feminist scholarship on the sociality of emotion, I develop the notion of 'affective relations'. Distinguishing from nationalist, humanitarian, and activist relations that set up divisive dynamics, campaigners invoked 'humanizing' to create affective relations based on common values, personalization, and responsiveness. Although the desired election results were not achieved, the focus on humanization represented a long-term shift to an inclusive alternative politics based on the transformation of power relations.

Keywords: affect, anthropology of the state, citizenship, humanitarianism, humanization, relationality, sociality of emotion

Perched on the arm of the sofa and cradling her empty champagne glass, Helen was energized.¹ The feeling in her friend Margaret's opulent living room had shifted from despair to palpable possibility. Over the past hour, seven women had participated in a 'community conversation' facilitated by an NGO that supports people seeking asylum.² The formal part of the evening was wrapping up, but they were still milling around, animatedly engaged in informal chat. They were considering going together to their local political representative, who was a parent at their children's school. Speaking with passion, Helen shared with Margaret her imaginary conversation with the representative: "How can you



justify what you're doing? Yes, you're saying you're turning back boats and trying to stop illegal [migrants], but can you *really as a human, as a mother*, can you honestly say that's ok?!" Helen laughed incredulously. "I'd like to put her on the spot. I'd just like to make her blush."

Helen, a human rights lawyer, was participating in this conversation as part of an NGO campaign in her inner-Melbourne electorate before the 2016 Australian election.³ The campaign's purpose was to change the hearts and minds of a middle-ground group known as 'persuadables'—the 60 percent of the population who did not have strong opinions about people seeking asylum. The campaign proposed to do this through 'community conversations' that shifted the affective register in which people engaged with the issue away from dominant nationalist rhetoric, based on security and protecting the nation from harm, to a 'values frame' that foregrounded common feelings shared by all regardless of political orientation.

Helen and her friend Margaret had volunteered to host one such conversation, inviting family, friends, and acquaintances to take part. The political representative to whom Helen referred was a well-to-do middle-aged woman, known to parrot her party's conservative views regarding immigration. She had held this federal electoral seat as a member of Parliament for nearly eight years. The participants in this campaign conversation sent their children to the same prestigious private school as the representative's children. This had previously been a source of consternation for them, but now they saw the opportunity it presented. The representative, previously painted as a monster by activists who publicly heckled her during her political campaign, was 'humanized' through this campaign conversation as a member of their school community and a mother just like them. As a mother, she could be made to feel ashamed, made to 'blush'. As a mother, surely she would be responsive to changing cruel and inhumane policies toward people seeking asylum.⁴

The transformation of a political representative from monster to mom at a time of crucial political significance provides an entry point into questions about the role of affective and moral registers in relations between citizens and the state. What affective and moral work was performed by this NGO campaign that enabled these conversation participants to entertain the possibility of engaging directly with their local political representative? What kind of 'affective relation' with the state did this campaign encourage, and to what effect? I situate these questions in the Australian humanitarian sector to see what happened when this new affective relation was introduced into a space with established divisive relations between actors. In other words, how did the attempt to create a humanized relation with the state emerge out of the need to reset a hostile one?

My exploration engages with two recent lines of inquiry in the anthropology of the state: 'affective states', or how the state is produced and sustained through affective investments (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015), and 'relational states',

or how states are constituted by and through relationships between actors (Thelen, Vetter et al. 2014). Drawing on feminist scholarship, I bring these two threads together to develop the notion of ‘affective relations’.⁵ I consider how, in humanitarian arenas, affective relations have tended to be connected to moral notions of compassion toward suffering (Fassin 2012; Malkki 2015; Ticktin 2011).⁶ Yet while this NGO campaign mobilized similar moral notions of humanitarian compassion on the surface, campaigners ultimately used it as a vehicle to redress what they viewed as divisive and generalizing elements that ran through existing nationalist, humanitarian, and activist discourses. I draw on the campaigners’ emic notion of ‘humanizing’ to outline the parameters of their new inclusive mode of relating that is based on eschewing divisions, personalizing interactions, and creating responsiveness between actors.

The article is structured as follows. First, I develop the key conceptual contributions of ‘affective relations’ and ‘humanization’. Then I introduce the field site and political context, demonstrating how a hostile ‘status quo’ relation with the state was reinforced by the humanitarian sector. I next illustrate how campaigners actively reset their affective relation with the state, shifting to a humanizing ‘values frame’. Following this, I discuss how implementation of the new affective relation encountered unexpected obstacles, revealing entrenched affective attachments to divisive discourses. Lastly, I apply the notion of humanizing the state. By rescaling and personifying the state, campaigners gave citizens a sense of power that could be used to influence politicians. I conclude that humanization represented an alternative politics that sought to transform power relations by inciting the will for collective action and responsibility regarding Australia’s deterrence policy toward people seeking asylum.

Affective Relations and Humanization

My notion of ‘affective relations’ combines anthropological theorizations of the state with feminist theories on the sociality of emotion. I focus on two anthropological strands: ‘affective’ and ‘relational’ states (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015; Thelen, Vetter et al. 2014). Both give primacy to ethnographic, everyday affective investments and relations between actors that bring the state into being. Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeleine Reeves (2015: 1) engage with the breadth of ways the state has been attended to in recent political anthropology, highlighting “the narrativized nature of ‘the state’ and the role of imagination in its emergence,” as well as ethnographic accounts foregrounding how the state materializes in everyday life through “bureaucratic practice, ideological production, or organized violence” (ibid.: 3).⁷ They contest the view of the state as a ‘fiction’ to be deconstructed, describing it instead as an “object of emotional investment” (ibid.) sustained and reproduced through

“claims, avoidances, and appeals that are made toward it and the emotional registers that these invoke” (ibid.: 1). Through emotional investments—such as fear, desire, hope—the state emerges, transforms, endures, or erodes (ibid.: 2). Laszczkowski and Reeves propose the use of affect to develop the intersubjective and embodied dimensions of this investment (ibid.: 5). Theirs is a project to foreground affect not just as epiphenomenal, but “constitutive of the political itself” (ibid.: 7).

Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Veters, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2014: 7) conceive of state as a “relational setting” to bridge an analytical gap they identify between anthropological accounts of state representations (e.g., discourse and images) and state practices. Here, actors with unequal access to resources “negotiate over ideas of legitimate power by drawing on existing state images—at once reaffirming and transforming these representations within concrete practices” (ibid.). Boundary work is one form of relational state making, where boundaries (e.g., civil society/state or state/family) are actively constructed and produce domains they seek to separate. Boundary work has been taken up by anthropologists studying statecraft in arenas where multiple actors—such as volunteers, NGOs, or family members—are involved (Brković 2016; Gilbert 2016; Read 2014; Read and Thelen 2007; Thelen, Thiemann et al. 2014). The blurring of the state’s boundaries (Gupta 1995) in such contexts requires intermediaries to “discursively distance themselves from the state, thereby recreating the image of a coherent state entity” (Thelen, Veters et al. 2014: 13).

Arising in the aftermath of a deconstructionist move in scholarship on the state (Abrams 1988; Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Foucault 1991; Mitchell 1999), these approaches offer a dynamic reading emphasizing both state coherence and dissipation. Here the state is not *a priori* coherent, but may become so through affective associations and relationships. As Thelen, Veters, and Benda-Beckmann (2014) point out, producing bounded entities is an effect of boundary work, intended or not. Yet as Laszczkowski and Reeves (2015) attest, this coherence is malleable: affective investments may cause the state to transform or even erode, as much as emerge and endure. It is this pull between coherence and deconstruction—the power of affect and relationships to both construct and transform—that provides the analytic flexibility required to describe what was happening in my field site, where NGOs both reproduced a hostile state and also sought to transform and humanize this state.

In bringing together affect and relations, I seek to highlight the interdependent nature of these registers, informed by feminist scholarship. The ‘affective turn’, led by scholars such as Brian Massumi (1995), hinged on a substantive and temporal distinction between the initial pre-subjective, embodied affective impulse followed by subjective, cognitive emotion formulated as cultural and discursive attributions of meaning (Mazzarella 2009). However, Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis (2018), among others (Leys 2011; Lutz 2017; Wetherell

2015), have questioned the Cartesian dualism between embodied affect and cognitive emotion, engaging the 'affective turn' with feminist scholarship on the sociality of emotion. They argue, similarly to others such as Sara Ahmed (2004), Emily Martin (2013), and Carolyn Pedwell (2014), that affect, emotion, and feelings are all deeply relational. Boler and Davis (2018: 81) propose thinking of affect as "emotions on the move. Affect may be understood as emotions that are collectively or intersubjectively manifested, experienced, and mobilized, out of the 'private', individual realm and into shared, even public spaces, which may then be channelled into [social] movement(s) ... Our emphasis on the relationality of affect and emotion offers a grammar to understand the collective and intersubjective dimensions of felt experience." This sense of collective movement captures the intensity of affect that exceeds discourse, while acknowledging interplay between emotion and affect in relational settings. The concept of affective relations emphasizes both the affective quality of relations in the humanitarian domain and the relational quality of feelings invoked through the campaign, allowing a focus on discursive, embodied, and intersubjective elements of conversations where feelings were transformed relationally through dynamic collective outpourings.

The term 'humanization' is based on emic expressions used by campaigners. They spoke of the need to 'humanize' people seeking asylum, and this desire extended to other actors with whom they had been locked in antagonistic relations, such as state actors and citizens who supported deterrence. Their campaign aimed to transform generalizing, unequal, and divisive relations. Divisive relations were most prevalent in dominant nationalist narratives deployed by the government, mainstream media, and many Australian citizens around the moral language of un/deservingness. People seeking asylum who arrived by boat were branded 'unauthorized' because they came without a visa. Stigmatized as 'queue jumpers', they were deemed 'undeserving' when juxtaposed with refugees seen as coming 'the right way' through sanctioned channels (McAdam 2013; G. Martin 2015; Peterie 2017).⁸ This criminalized and hence dehumanized them, making them into un-Australian 'non-persons' who had violated their right to be treated fairly (McMillan 2017: 39).

However, the campaigners' notion of humanization also targeted divisive or antagonistic elements of humanitarian and activist discourses. This was novel in the sense that campaigners identified divisive aspects across the ideological spectrum. While humanitarian discourses were powerful counter-narratives to nationalist discourse, campaigners recognized, as have anthropologists critiquing humanitarianism (e.g., Fassin 2012; Malkki 2015; Ticktin 2011), that such discourses could counter-intuitively have a dehumanizing effect by promoting a reductive view of humanity. An approach that emphasizes suffering can create hierarchical unequal relations between givers, who have agency, and recipients, who are seen as passive victims.

Activist discourse also relied on the perpetuation of divisions: between the political left and right, and between activists and the state. Activists followed a notion of politics as antagonistic (cf. Laszczkowski 2019), constructing an oppositional relation between unfeeling, ignorant conservative voters and a hostile state versus compassionate, informed progressive voters. This fed a dynamic where activists abused the state and deterrence supporters for their immoral actions.

Humanization was both a relation and a process, developed as a counterpoint to dehumanizing divisions. Attempting to reset antagonistic dynamics, NGO campaigners invoked humanization to promote inclusive affective relations between oppositional groups. Humanization did two main things: first, it put forth a notion of humanity based on common values and rights; second, it rescaled relations away from generalized stereotypes to the level of the person, whether a person seeking asylum, a state agent, or a deterrence voter. In doing so, it represented an attempt to transform existing power relations.

The Status Quo: Antagonistic Relations

The campaign was organized by a Melbourne social justice NGO that delivered humanitarian services and conducted advocacy for people seeking asylum. The group was part of an urban, progressive humanitarian landscape—a sector that delivered services and a social movement for the rights of people seeking asylum. I conducted 16 months of fieldwork and 54 interviews during 2015–2016 among this landscape of grassroots community organizations, professional NGOs, religious groups, and refugee/migrant groups, all reliant on volunteers. The average volunteer and staff profile was white, middle class, and female, fitting into broader volunteer trends in Australia (ABS 2014; Altman and Demetriou 2016). Yet there was also demographic diversity, as well as a complex racialized politics of helping heightened by the settler-colonial context that is important to mention, although I do not have space to address it here.⁹ In terms of moral and political orientation, the volunteers and NGO staff whom I encountered were proud of Melbourne’s reputation as a welcoming city, with state and local governments more supportive of people seeking asylum than the national government.¹⁰ They were outraged at what they viewed as an increasingly hostile national deterrence policy.

Their outrage had grown in response to Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), a militarized border regime initiated in 2013 that criminalizes the endeavor of reaching Australia by boat (Hodge 2015; van Berlo 2015). Deterrence policy has garnered bipartisan support since the 1990s, but OSB is a particularly sensationalized and violent iteration. Designed to finally “stop the boats,” the catchphrase of once Prime Minister Tony Abbott, OSB includes boat turn-backs by the Australian

Navy, indefinite incarceration in offshore detention centers, and temporary visas, all intended to obstruct permanent pathways to citizenship (McAdam 2013; Refugee Council of Australia 2018). The message is harsh. In a communications campaign to source countries distributed in 12 languages via YouTube, military general Commander Angus Campbell, dressed in combat-ready attire, threatens: “NO WAY. YOU WILL NOT MAKE AUSTRALIA HOME” (Laughland 2014).¹¹

This was the hostile ‘face’ of the state that supporters of people seeking asylum were fighting against. We could see them as calling the hostile state into being through their affective responses and oppositional relations. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002: 4) notes: “The very people who critique the state also reproduce it through their ‘fantasies’ for the state.”¹² Paradoxically, in their opposition, supporters reinforced and reproduced a hostile state entity through antagonistic affective relations and boundary work, in addition to their language, tone, and strength of feeling. They spoke of “Australia’s national shame” and “missing heart” and expressed guilt at being unsuccessful in combating OSB. Bolstered by evidence from the UN, human rights groups, lawyers, and medical professionals (Davidson 2019; Doherty 2018b; Hartley and Fleay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2019; Procter et al. 2018; Reilly 2019), they referred to atrocities committed, human rights violations, torture, prison, a broken system, a problem, and “cowardly” politicians. Some supporters believed that the state had no right to sovereignty, as its existence was founded on illegitimate acts of violence toward Australia’s First Peoples. The violence of OSB was seen as a continuation of this founding narrative. The Melbourne NGO’s volunteer briefings entailed news and policy updates that became sites for collective affective outpourings. Xenophobic comments of conservative politicians and abuse in offshore detention centers evoked derision, disbelief, and outrage. The NGO’s visits to lobby Parliament induced fierce determination and support. Reporting hostility was seen by the CEO as a way of keeping the fight and the cause alive. This was an activist politics that equated being political with being antagonistic (Laszczkowski 2019).

The hostile state was also reproduced in the everyday through boundary work. Neo-liberal welfare restructuring (Murphy 2006) combined with punitive deterrence objectives had led to outsourcing welfare provision for people seeking asylum to NGOs in Australia (R. Sampson 2016). Here, NGOs and volunteers became intimately ‘entangled’ with the state (S. Sampson 2017), ‘responsibilized’ to take care of themselves and their own communities through neo-liberal and humanitarian governance practices (Hyatt 2001; Muehlebach 2012; Rose 1996; Rozakou 2016). Similarly to what Rachel Humphris (2019) has observed in the UK, volunteers supporting migrants unintentionally became everyday ‘faces of the state’ (Navaro-Yashin 2002), as their morally laden decisions impacted upon access to services, employment opportunities, and connections with Australian society. During fieldwork, some shared that

they thought people seeking asylum did not differentiate between volunteers and state officials, an irony not lost on them.

Boundary work allowed them to navigate service provision while distancing themselves from what they viewed as the morally repugnant objectives of OSB and differentiating themselves from other NGOs ‘implicated’ in OSB through government funding. At a volunteer information session, the Melbourne NGO’s CEO made it very clear that they were not part of the state, decrying in reference to politicians: “Bugger them. We don’t need them. We can be the moral compass for the society we want.” Here the NGO fit into a wider ‘alter-political’ trend (Hage 2015) of distancing from the state to pursue alternatives, a key feature of global leftist social movements (Graeber 2009; Maeckelbergh 2011; Razsa 2015; Sitrin 2006). This boundary work, both relational and affective, was seen as necessary because the state had accrued negative associations.¹³ Yet another effect of saying “bugger them” was to assert that change would have to happen *despite* the state, reinforcing an oppositional distant relation between state and society.

Resetting Relations through Conversations

Eight weeks prior to the 2016 election, the Melbourne NGO’s community conversations campaign was launched. Speaking to an audience of supporters, an NGO campaigner shared the rationale behind the campaign: “How have we gone backwards? I realized that because I’d been so frustrated, the way I’d started to talk was semi-abusive—you’re horrible people, how can you think this way, we’re torturing people. I realized that we had been talking to the country in words that required people to accept that they’d supported something horrible.” She had been appalled that support had dipped significantly in the polls. She acknowledged that she and other supporters were at fault. They had alienated the public through their antagonistic language, failing to capture the popular imagination because they were blaming rather than persuading.¹⁴

The campaign set out to “capture the persuadables,” that is, 60 percent of the population who did not feel strongly about the asylum seeker issue. The 20 percent ‘base’ group were already supporters, and the 20 percent ‘opponents’ were never going to change their minds, so there was no point targeting them. Appealing to ‘persuadables’ was seen as the key to long-term change. Based on linguistic analysis, the campaign identified broadly appealing messaging. Divisive and alienating language was replaced with cohesive and relatable language based on common values such as safety, family, and community. Instead of a discourse that dehumanized people seeking asylum, the new language focused on people seeking asylum as fellow community members who shared the same values. Campaigners wanted to restore their personhood and hence

make them 'grievable' (Hodge 2015, drawing on Judith Butler)—to make the public care about them and relate to them.

The plan was to test-drive the new values-driven language through community conversations in an inner-city Melbourne electorate with a high percentage of supporters, with the eventual aim of getting people to use the language in their everyday conversations. The electorate was mostly upper-middle-class, with pockets of diversity and socio-economic variation—a mix of progressives (often Jewish with former refugee backgrounds) and conservatives. Campaigners were NGO staff and volunteers, and they solicited volunteer involvement from supporters in the electorate as facilitators or hosts of conversations. At a facilitator training workshop for volunteers, campaigner Oliver, who was in his late twenties, highlighted the desired shift to humanizing discourse. "We're pushing the reset button!" he declared. "For so long, we've been subjected to a national discourse that dehumanizes people! I'm going to call this the national interest frame. Can I get some examples?" Volunteers called out in rapid fire: "Illegal," "fear," "terrorism," "queue jumping," "stop the boats." "Thank you for your suggestion to stop the boats, but my hand refuses to write it," Oliver quipped to laughter. He continued: "This has been the dominant frame for my lifetime. How do *we* want to have this conversation?" The responses came back more thoughtfully: "A fair go," "compassionate," "respect," "empathy," "dignity," "justice." "We need to set up this values frame to be stronger than the national interest frame!" Oliver rallied.

Trained volunteer facilitators armed with affective scripts arrived at homes where curated groups chatted in living rooms, drinking tea with cake and sipping wine with cheese. Facilitators began: "What are the values that guide us in the way we treat each other?" Collective values that arose centered on empathy, fairness, and respect, values with cultural resonance for Anglo-Australians harking back to early settler times (Kapferer and Morris 2003; McMillan 2017).¹⁵ Participants emphasized rights regardless of how people came to Australia and the duties of the community to treat others as one wished to be treated. They then listened to an audio-recording of a man sharing his lived experience of seeking asylum. He used to be a tradesman in his home country where he was now unable to live. He wanted to make a contribution in Australia, but instead had been waiting for years for his claim to be processed, without knowing why. He then received a letter from the Australian government telling him to get a lawyer. He was anxious and just wanted to live freely, without fear. At this point, the tone in the conversation shifted—participants began to speak in a heightened emotional register, expressing distress over the lack of information given and the time spent waiting. They then heard an audio-recording of an immigration lawyer. They were given concrete information about how the refugee determination process was more punitive for boat arrivals than for other groups. They were asked to reflect on whether this fit with their values. All agreed that it was unfair.

Many noted that the Australian public “would be shocked if they knew.” At the end, participants filled in an evaluation eliciting whether the discussion would affect their vote and the policy changes that they would like to see from a list including a fair review process, family reunification, and permanent protection.

The conversations could be seen to create affective relations of humanization in at least three ways. First, the conversations created humanized relations between the participants themselves. Although the initial set-up was discursive, the conversations enabled a relational feeling-space. The real-time conversational aspect and voice recordings brought the language into an affective, dynamic zone. Instead of pitting left- and right-wing voters against each other, conversations brought participants, who may have had different political and moral orientations, into dialogue, uniting them around common values.

Second, the conversations brought the public closer to people seeking asylum, connecting them to the human side of the issue by demonstrating the impact on a person seeking asylum in his own affective terms via a voice recording. Moreover, the entire campaign was focused on 24,500 people seeking asylum who were living in Australia, waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. While they waited, they lived on temporary visas with no right to family reunion, meager state income support (less than the lowest welfare benefit), and inconsistent work and study rights (Doherty 2018a; Refugee Council of Australia 2018). The campaign made visible a situation about which many Australians had been unaware—that over 80 percent of people seeking asylum affected by deterrence were actually living next door in precarious conditions, not incarcerated on distant islands. This was not common knowledge. Public discourse was more about ‘moral panic’ (G. Martin 2015) and stopping boats than policy measures.

Third, the campaign reduced the distance between citizen and state. By giving details about the effects of OSB on people seeking asylum living in Australia, the campaign broke down an ‘impossible situation’ (Malkki 2015) and provided concrete avenues for change through specific ‘policy asks’, such as family reunification, longer review time frames, and work/study rights. Campaigners also gave participants suggestions about how to lobby the state. This connected them with the state by identifying specific politicians, rather than a hostile and impenetrable entity. As Oliver instructed at workshops, in order for people to feel that human action could change a situation, they had to believe that specific human actors had caused it. Supporters were encouraged to get together and host phone banks where they could all call their local political candidates to express their views.

This affective register of humanization was crucial in evoking a sense of hope. As a participant shared: “It changed me quite profoundly. I feel encouraged, reassured, inspired. In the beginning I wasn’t sure, but finding out how others felt about the unfairness was extraordinary. I went to gatherings where

the emotions evoked were so strong—there was a palpable sense of consciousness shifting. People became enthusiastic and outraged, and it gave me conviction to move forward.” Propelled by humanization rather than a hostile relation against the state and deterrence supporters, this participant did not feel despairing, but galvanized into collective action with people she may not have traditionally considered her allies.

Affective Slippages

Yet established narratives continued to structure how supporters spoke. There were slippages through familiarity, and they formed ‘mobilizing metaphors’ (Shore and Wright 1997) around which moral meanings clustered. Using the examples of divisive discourses outlined earlier, I show how sedimented attachments meant that being a ‘good activist’ was associated with opposing the state, being a ‘good person’ with being Australian, and being a ‘good humanitarian’ with saving people. These examples reveal that people can be affectively invested in dominant narratives that inadvertently reinforce divisive rather than inclusive relations, demonstrating the limits of a humanizing politics.

First, campaign manager Jude encountered the intractability of antagonistic activist politics when she ventured outside their pilot electorate. Workshops to train supporters in the new messaging were piloted in Melbourne before moving to regional Australia, what Jude called “the heartland.” Following her first weekend in regional Australia, I interviewed Jude at the local pub. Workshops included role-playing between a supporter and a persuadable voter, but the role-plays with rural supporters had not worked. People playing the persuadable had instead channeled an oppositional mindset, arguing with the supporter practicing the new messaging and “giving them a terrible time,” using hostile deterrence rhetoric. Jude lamented: “This stuff is deeply entrenched. It was like they were on this loop tape and couldn’t get off it.” One participant did not know how to shift her affective register from despair to hope: “She was saying she doesn’t have the answers. She had just run a fundraising event, and people came up to her feeling defeated and she went down the rabbit hole with policy discussions that are very much government framing and didn’t have a way of being able to reframe that and give people hope about things we can do.”

Jude found that these rural supporters were locked in an antagonistic relation with the state and deterrence supporters. Because expressing hostility toward OSB was the morally accepted form of being a good activist, they had become well-versed in the very hostile rhetoric that the NGO sought to counter. Jude’s imagery of the loop tape was evocative: this relation could only go around in circles, perpetuating the status quo. It reproduced a ‘problem-focused’ rather than a ‘solutions-focused’ affective register. Supporters were less confident

about formulating and imagining alternatives because they were constantly in a defensive mode, preparing themselves to pre-empt attacks from hostile enemies.

Second, supporters retained deep moral and affective attachments to nationality. This made it difficult to parse out divisive, exclusionary elements of nationalism from positive associations with Australianness. In 2015, posters with “Real Australians Say Welcome” in bold black letters had been plastered in capital cities by artist Peter Drew and went viral on social media. The NGO had rallied behind the messaging, branding T-shirts with the slogan. The slogan was resonant in a public arena where Australianness was often equated with being a good person, with immoral behavior framed as ‘un-Australian’ (Gunders 2012). The use of the word ‘real’ was a way of recapturing the moral essence of Australianness, associating it with a hospitable perspective.¹⁶ But when running a workshop in 2016, Oliver remarked that references to nationality introduced distinctions, taking away the emphasis on “people as people.” This was considered exclusionary or essentializing. “This made me sad,” he reflected, and this sentiment rippled through the room in heavy silence. Supporters continued to stumble when avoiding words that carried sedimented affective resonance, such as ‘Australia’ and ‘Australian’.

Akhil Gupta (2017: 1862) has noted that people can hold “contradictory feelings about the state.” In his example of corruption in India, cynicism against corruption co-existed with attachment to sovereignty and patronage. Similarly, these Melbourne supporters abhorred an immoral state that tarnished Australia’s reputation, but were still affectively attached to Australianness. As public discourse aligned the notion of Australianness with morality, not identifying as Australian perhaps had negative connotations of lack of membership in a moral community, inhibiting the capacity to feel national identification and belonging.

Finally, campaigners were acutely aware of issues that scholars have outlined around the tendency of humanitarian discourse to foster reductive notions of humanity centered around suffering and need (Fassin 2012; Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2014), reproducing unequal relations by engaging in a ‘politics of pity’ (Chouliaraki 2010). Yet even with this knowledge of the problematics of humanitarian discourse, there was no unified message being transmitted. Like many NGOs seeking to ‘do good’ (Lashaw et al. 2017), putting forth a ‘moral mission’ was part of the *modus operandi* (Eliasoph 2011). This extended to affective entreatments to donors. The NGO sought to stir up an ‘impulse to give’ (Bornstein 2012), tugging on heartstrings. This was critiqued internally, even by the CEO who recognized that this could feed “disempowering narratives,” but also ruminated on the paradox that “if you paint a picture of everything’s fine, who’s going to give to you?”¹⁷ A frustrated campaigner working with the NGO highlighted this internal dissonance between creating a new humanizing narrative and reinforcing one based on suffering. They described the NGO’s latest fundraising appeal—an e-mail to donors asking, “Would you

let them go hungry tonight?”—as “inaccurate and degrading.” They argued that it was “offensive to people [seeking asylum] who are working and making a life. What that e-mail says to our supporters is, all people seeking asylum are destitute [they banged the table for emphasis], and you should feed them because you’re a white privileged person. And this feeds a narrative that isn’t going to get us to policies that respect other people’s humanity.” They explained that the fundraising had been particularly successful, highlighting the core tension between institutional survival and creating systemic change. Evoking suffering ensured the continuation of services, but at the cost of perpetuating a narrative based on reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Humanizing the State

“Why have you chosen to campaign in this safe [conservative] seat?” Margaret’s friend Beatrice asked the NGO facilitator. “People think this electorate is not that supportive of people seeking asylum, but we’ve found it’s not actually true,” responded the facilitator. “We’ve got a chance to get in [the political representative’s] ear. We’re not saying it’s going to drastically change, but she’s losing support. We can tell her, you’re losing touch with the people in your electorate.”

Having discussed the NGO campaign and its obstacles, I return to the scene with which I opened to come back to the question of how this campaign mobilized affect to reconfigure state-society relations. The facilitator was referring to the local political representative, the mother whose children went to school with theirs. She gave the women in the room the sense that their conversation with the representative could actually make a difference. Their own electorate was not as conservative as they may have thought. There were like-minded potential voters out there, and they had the opportunity to show their local candidate that her constituents supported people seeking asylum. The candidate also needed to consider their views, because her safe conservative seat was under pressure from the new progressive Greens candidate.

Over their hour-long conversation, they had reflected on a ‘vicious cycle’ of fear: the public was fearful because of the state’s nationalist rhetoric, and politicians legitimated their hostile actions by claiming that they were responding to community sentiment. Margaret called this “an unwillingness of our leaders to allow the Australian public to humanize [people seeking asylum].” In order to break this antagonistic affective cycle, participant Jill turned to the power of democracy: “We need to make people aware there’s a choice. We teach our kids that we live in a democracy and can talk about things we would like to change, and that elections are when you get to vote for people who will put forward changes you want.”¹⁸ Galvanizing supporters at the launch, campaigner Bianca articulated this new relationship between community and the state: “There

was a time where the politicians led the community. Today it's going to have to come from us. Let your political candidate understand what you're angry about and what your vision is. Let's get politics back to the dinner table."

This affective shift from hostility to humanization was achieved by bringing the state within the public's purview: *humanizing* the state. I use the term 'humanizing' in two senses. First, it gives the state a face, rescaling politics to the level of the dinner table and personifying the state as actual, locatable political figures who could be influenced through conversation. Second, it refers to a *process* of humanization, where the state would become responsive, not hostile. Through the identification of particular state actors, campaigners attempted to engage their moral obligations as members of a community. Like the example of turning a monster into a mom, the creation of a collective moral consciousness generated a belief in the ability to shame these state actors and to hold them to account. Scaling down had the effect of reducing state power.¹⁹ The state was no longer impenetrable, but tangible, responsive—the vector of the people's will.

In this vision, people held power to incite political change, not through *distancing from* but by *engaging with* the state. Similar to the cooperative relationship that Rosie Read (2014) observed between civil society and the state in Czech health care, this was a constructive affective relation. Rather than turning away from the state through despair or outrage, campaigners sought to mobilize a new, hopeful affective relation. The campaign's premise was that if they could galvanize enough community support, they could influence politicians to institute fairer policies. Linking values to votes showed a continued investment in the Australian democratic system.

By constructing a united moral community, the campaign gave the public a role as the state's moral arbiter and influencer.²⁰ Their role was clear in the report generated from the conversations, which opened: "As a caring people we have a proud history of defending what we believe in. Our values extend beyond our politics and this is why we're not afraid to hold our governments to account when policies are at odds with our sense of fairness, respect and doing the right thing. When a community is aware and works together in defense of what is fair and right anything is possible." It was the role of the community to hold the state to account when the state was not behaving humanely. This was a bottom-up view of power, where the community had the ability to influence the state.

Campaigners also had a role as the interface between society and the state, connecting them with political structures. Written for local political candidates, their report showcased the voices of constituents directly to their elected representatives and entailed concrete policy demands. A couple of weeks before the election, campaigners bundled into the car to deliver the report personally to the candidates' offices. The Greens candidate showed great enthusiasm. The conservative candidate whom Helen wanted to speak to 'mom to mom' was

unavailable, so they left the report with her staff. She had proved unresponsive on several prior occasions, but they felt sorry for her as they had heard she was feeling stressed about losing her electoral seat. This show of sympathy exemplified the way their affective relation had shifted—they no longer vilified, but humanized her.

Conclusion: Responsive Relations

Following an NGO campaign for people seeking asylum in the politically heightened lead-up to the 2016 Australian election, I have traced a shift in campaigners from a hostile to a humanized affective relation with the state. Refracted through the lens of Operation Sovereign Borders, supporters of people seeking asylum reproduced a hostile ‘status quo’ relation with the state. In this relation, the state had no ‘heart’, no ‘moral compass’. It was powerful and impenetrable, enacting cruelty through total yet banal and diffuse control: surveillance, policing, bureaucratic procedures, withholding information. Supporters had stopped considering the state as a viable actor in instigating change. Their disengagement spoke to the perceived failures of representative democracy. Because deterrence policy has bipartisan support from both main political parties, there was a feeling of hopelessness. Australia’s system of government did not represent them, nor did it provide a viable alternative to vote for.

The NGO campaign entailed ‘resetting’ campaigners’ own antagonistic vision of state-society relations through a humanizing approach. Humanizing was a process and an affective relation that rescaled and personified interactions, impacting upon relations with the state, other citizens, and people seeking asylum. Rather than viewing themselves in opposition to the state and to citizens who supported deterrence policy, the campaign repositioned everyone on the same side, conjoining citizens of diverse political orientation, people seeking asylum, and even state actors as members of a caring community. This was an attempt to reset oppositional relations embedded across the ideological spectrum in nationalist, humanitarian, and activist discourses, between left versus right, mainstream Australians versus people seeking asylum, and activists versus the state. Humanizing stood for an alternative politics that sought to help these groups relate, rendering them responsive to—and responsible for—one another.

What does this alternative politics of humanization add to an anthropology of the state? By bringing feminist notions of the relationality of affect into dialogue with political anthropology, I have sought to enhance anthropological theories of the state which argue that affect and relations sit at the core of the political (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015; Thelen, Veters et al. 2014). In conceptualizing affect as ‘emotions on the move’ (Boler and Davis 2018), I seek to highlight the constantly shifting nature of people’s interactions with the state.

Here, affective relations can both reproduce and transform ways of conceptualizing the state. We can witness this double movement in the NGO campaign by the co-existence of notions of a hostile state and attachments to entrenched divisive discourses with attempts to humanize this state and render it responsive.

I want to end by considering the possibilities offered by this shift to humanization. Discussing relations between Catholic environmental activists and the Italian state, Laszczkowski (2019) describes how a police officer took off his sunglasses to attentively listen to an activist in a moment of exchange. Laszczkowski draws upon Donna Haraway's (2016) notion of 'response-ability' to argue that in this moment, the police officer as a state agent showed his capacity to be responsive. For Haraway, 'response-ability' is an ethical practice entailing the cultivation of shared feelings, capabilities, and modes of obligation (ibid.). It was precisely this 'response-ability' that Catholic activists were seeking to draw out from state actors, moving away from antagonistic politics based on notions of enmity to "politics of a different kind" (Laszczkowski 2019: 14) based on transforming "agents of 'the state' into vulnerable and responsive human beings" (ibid.).

I found the notion of responsiveness to be at the heart of the kind of politics pursued by the Melbourne NGO campaign. Although the campaign met its limits against entrenched affective relations, failing to influence the outcome of the 2016 and 2019 elections, I argue that the attempt to transform power relations represented a longer-term shift to an alternative politics based on relating and responding.²¹ While ethnographic accounts have illustrated how volunteers in neo-liberal contexts are 'responsibilized' (cf. Hyatt 2001; Muehlebach 2012; Rozakou 2016), in this case campaigners sought to foster more 'response-able' relations between the public, the state, and people seeking asylum. Citizens mobilized humanization to assert the need for shared moral responsibility. As a conversation participant put it, "We need to give our politicians permission to do the right thing." This prefigured a bottom-up view of power relations, enabling supporters to believe that they could change political situations. Even if state actors would not engage with them, they would continue to appeal to the moral obligations of those state actors to be responsive and to institute fair and humane policies for people seeking asylum.

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Notes

1. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
2. The phrase ‘people seeking asylum’ is best practice in the Australian social movement for refugees, part of the affective discursive politics discussed in this article.
3. I attended three of these sessions and analyzed data from 21 conversations. Participants were mainly progressive, Anglo-Australian, and middle to upper class. The composition of the three conversations I attended were (1) female, professional, middle-aged and one teenager, inner electorate; (2) male/female senior citizens, some from Jewish refugee backgrounds, inner electorate; and (3) male/female service providers, some with Christian backgrounds, suburban outskirts of the electorate.
4. I am interested here in the commonality of motherhood as a means to relate and create shared moral stances. I discuss the gendered dimensions of ‘mom to mom’ politics in other work (see Altman, forthcoming).
5. Carolyn Pedwell (2014) develops the notion of affective relations extensively in her book about transnational empathy, also informed by feminist scholarship. My use of the term evokes a similar understanding of the relationality of emotions and the interrelatedness of emotion, affect, and power. However, in this

- article I use the term specifically to bring together—and dialogue with—affective and relational anthropological theories of the state.
6. Fassin (2012: 1) notes that moral sentiments at the heart of humanitarianism link affect with values.
 7. Laszczkowski and Reeves (2015) summarize a vast literature that I cannot list in full, but worthy of special mention is Begoña Aretxaga (2003) for her emphasis on emotional investments in the notion of the state.
 8. This argument was used to reinforced the myth of the orderly global ‘queue’ in which ‘good’ asylum seekers wait, which scholars have noted to be a misleading way of conceptualizing a complex process (Gale 2004; Kampmark 2006; Watters 2007).
 9. My positionality in the field should be acknowledged as fitting a typical volunteer profile: a white Australian-born woman with migrant parents, politically and morally aligned with the campaign’s cause.
 10. Australia has a three-tier system of government: federal (national), state, and local.
 11. Alison Mountz (2011: 119) has noted that countries with the largest per capita refugee resettlement programs—Australia, Canada, and the United States—also exercise the most punitive border enforcement toward those who arrive without advance permission, claiming their “right to sovereign assertion.” This bifurcated approach is a common feature of many border regimes (Holmes and Castañeda 2016).
 12. I follow Navaro-Yashin (2002) in using ‘fantasy’ to mean the ways in which people collectively imagine the state, not to suggest that it is somehow unreal.
 13. Matei Candea (2011) and Čarna Brković (2016) outline similar cases where negative associations with politics caused Corsican educators to identify as non-political and Bosnian NGOs to pursue ‘depoliticization from below’.
 14. The same campaigner acknowledged that the state was effective at affectively influencing the Australian public by claiming to protect the nation and save lives at sea by deterring people smugglers. In doing so, the state was mobilizing what Fassin (2012) terms a logic of ‘humanitarian reason’—one that rationalizes brutal, militarized means in the name of humanitarian ends.
 15. Notions of egalitarianism carried moral weight for participants, based on tropes of mateship and mutual aid rooted in early settler times. Rural communities had relied on one another in harsh conditions, creating an ethic of self-reliance, hard work, and unity across class divisions inherited from Britain (Kapferer and Morris 2003).
 16. Heidi Armbruster (2018) notes a similar attempt to associate compassion with Britishness relating to humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees in the UK.
 17. It is worthwhile noting that a common counter-narrative against ‘disempowering suffering’ was for NGOs to discursively promote people seeking asylum as resilient subjects, replicating neo-liberal values of successful personhood (see Evans and Reid 2014).
 18. Australia has compulsory voting. While voting rates are correspondingly high, around 5 percent of voters cast informal votes that cannot be counted (see

https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/informal-voting-2016.pdf). Others cast ‘donkey’ votes that can skew the vote (see <https://australian-politics.com/voting/donkey-votes>).

19. It is not my intention to romanticize the power of ‘the local’. Indeed, Tanya Jakimow (2018) notes that affective mobilization at the local level can have uneven results.
20. This ethical stance can be captured in the sentiment “keeping the bastards honest,” which entered the public vernacular in 1977 when Don Chipp established the Australian Democrats to hold the balance of power in the Senate (upper house).
21. It is notable that workshops based on the messaging promoted by the campaign are still being held today, demonstrating a long-term commitment.

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