Beyond the Horizon of the State: Listening to offshore detention's longue durée*

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The clip begins with the slow, repeating sound of a frog chirruping. My ear is drawn closer. The atmosphere is calm, but not empty. There is a 'liveness' to it; a background hum. The sounds of the jungle at night; of 'nature', the forest. The chirrup continues. Soon, human voices puncture the soundscape, men speak briefly to each other as they pass. Later, the sound of a vehicle enters the frame. It comes closer. I hear the 'beep beep' of a car horn, the rolling of tyres as they pass over rough gravel, then through what sounds like water or wet ground. Then the car—like the men's voices before it—fades away into the distance. The sounds of the jungle come back into focus. The chirrups continue, insects join the chorus too. A dog barks in the distance. An unidentified source of water sloshes and subsides. Again, men's voices interrupt the rhythm of the jungle, close enough to hear, but far enough for them to remain unintelligible. Later, footsteps grow louder and men acknowledge one other in passing— 'hello',

* This essay is one of six pieces in this special issue dedicated to the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, which you may therefore like to read together. For a general introduction and the curatorial history of the work, start with Parker and Stern (2020). The collection also includes essays by Emma Russell, Andrew Brooks and André Dao, along with a conversation between André Dao and Behrouz Boochani.

'goodnight', 'hello', 'goodnight' they say. The footsteps fade away. Another vehicle passes by in the distance; the dog's bark continues; the sharp staccato of a cicak's click click click click; another car; more sounds of the jungle. And then, after ten minutes, the clip ends.

1

The night before last, sitting by the fence near the jungle is a ten-minute sound recording made by author and journalist Behrouz Boochani while forcibly detained on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea as part of the brutal regime of racialised border control that is Australia's immigration and offshore detention policy. The clip is one of eighty-four, ten-minute audio recordings that make up the collaborative artwork *how are you today* (2018). The work was forged through intimate and sustained relations between and across Australia and its former colonial territories, and through trans-border solidarities and creative relationships between six men then held on Manus Island — Abdul Aziz Muhamat, Farhad Bandesh, Behrouz Boochani, Samad Abdul, Shamindan Kanapathi and Kazem Kazemi — and Jon Tjhia, André Dao and Michael Green in Melbourne (Narrm). Collectively, the Manus Recording Project Collective. Each day for the duration of the exhibition (between July and October 2018), one ten-minute sound recording was uploaded from one of the men on Manus and sent 'onshore' to be played back in the Ian Potter Museum of Art, on unceded Wurundjeri lands.

how are you today has since been exhibited in various forms, within and beyond the gallery space (Parker and Stern 2020), and now exists as a fourteen-hour sound archive (https://manusrecordingproject.com/). As an archive, it testifies to the carceral conditions of duress and unfreedom of six men forcibly detained offshore at a specific moment in history. More broadly, it indexes Australia's increasingly amorphous and diffuse system of punitive policies and migration laws. It does both these things in ways that confound expectations of what life in an offshore 'black site' (Pugliese 2013) might sound like. For the most part, it does not conform to a recognisable genre of either

refugee testimony or legal narration; nor does it 'narrate' the injustice it catalogues so much as sound out its conditions. In other words, I suggest the work is listening-oriented, rather than organised around voice or speech, even though voice and speech are present. It takes a form that elides/eludes narrative, exposing the very limits of what settler-colonial carceral logic and law can hear; or rather, sounds out what it is structured *not* to hear (Stauffer 2016).

Questions of justice are intimately connected to conditions of listening, hearing and attention, within and beyond settler law, and in everyday life (Stauffer 2015, de Souza and Dreher (forthcoming)). But when the logic of 'crisis' dominates socio-legal, political and media frames of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia and beyond, what failures of hearing are naturalised? Responding to this Special Issue's call to consider the acoustics of justice, this essay is an attempt to develop more just hearings that register the 'long emergencies of slow violence' (Nixon 2011) that *how are you today* both catalogues and resists. What does it mean to attend to these 'site-specific acts of listening' (Brophy 2019)? How does the work prompt and challenge its audience to centre those at once living at outside of the shelter of the Australian state, yet subject to its brutal regime of racialised border control? How might it suggest more ethical modes of responsiveness that listen differently, or otherwise? Modes that de-centre the state to listen in solidarity with those who live beyond its shelter or under its duress (Bassel 2017). Or, to follow Andrew Brooks' (2019) provocation, how might we 'listen against the state' itself? Rather than making a central 'claim' or 'argument' in order to answer these questions, the form of this essay takes its lead from attuning and responding to the work itself. It is a work that invites us to sit with, turn over, work through tensions and complexities — to think about practices and unfoldings, rather than offer answers or definitive ends. It demands slow and attentive listening.

The clip described at the beginning of this essay, *the fence near the jungle,* indexes the compound fence marking the border of the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre where Boochani and hundreds of

other men were held at the time. The RTC in East Lorengau was one of three locations where men were transferred after the October 2017 'closure' of the Manus Regional Processing Centre (MRPC), a repurposed Royal Australian Navy base. The fence was a physical, yet porous boundary through which movement and freedom were severely constrained. The men were 'free' to move around Manus Island during the day, but movement was restricted at night. Boochani records the sounds of the night jungle to call attention to the way in which the sounds of Manus Prison are naturalised; what might be heard as a 'natural' or 'peaceful' island environment[2] is in fact one that has been deliberately mobilised by the Australian state as a place of punishment (see also, for example, *Kazem, yesterday, watching videos from the day's swimming with friends* or *Farhad, on Thursday, walking along the beach and into the forest* for the way in which sounds of the beach/ocean call up a similar tension). What we hear is in fact a 'carceral atmosphere' (Russell 2020). This connects to a longer history in which jungles, deserts and oceans have been mobilised within punitive regimes, or as necropolitical borderscapes in Oceania and elsewhere (Mawani 2018, Perera 2007). While the *sound* of the fence is noticeably absent (the fence cannot be 'heard' per se), Boochani captures its violent presence by locating a plurality of listening public(s) in proximity to it. Boochani makes audible the suffocating 'settler atmosphere' (Simmons 2017) in which he has been confined, where the conditions of breath and breathing 'are collective and unequally distributed, with particular qualities and intensities that are felt differently through and across time'. The clip prompts consideration of our/their relations to a continued history of extractive and neo-colonial relations between the Australian state (founded on First Nations' dispossession and incarceration) and an archipelago of prison islands on its former colonial territories (Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Christmas Island). The sounds that 'leak' across and through the fence are also a reminder of the simultaneous fixity and permeability of the border, of the 'reiterative pattern of openings and closures which mark the persistence, and indeed *expansion*, of confinement and punishment, rather than its 'end' (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019: 2).

Across the archive, the men record themselves sharing time together; passing time in isolation; caught in 'indefinite stuckness' (Russell and Rae 2019); enduring the long, slowing 'sticky time' of waiting (Griffiths 2014). Just as the description *the fence* locates listeners spatially in relation to Lorengau camp, listeners are temporally located in relation to when Boochani made the recording (*the night before last*)—at the time, more than five years into his imprisonment on Manus. The soundings of frogs, cicadas, and cicaks become sonic markers that index the slow, sustained violence of the settler colonial Australian state, the temporal torture of time. In conversation with André Dao, a collaborator on the work, Boochani (2020) reflected:

> … that's why I recorded the voice of [the] jungle… we were in that place every day and every moment, and every moment we're struggling with that systematic torture, and that's why I think time is very important. I wanted to show time, and silence. And help people to imagine that how hard it is that for years, and years, and years, you just listen to the jungle; you listen to the animals; you look at the world, you know. People just think that every day from morning until night, that we have physical violence and the guards attack us. No, it's not like this, you know. Most of the lives in that place is that these people are […] under torture by time.

For Boochani, a central motivator for creating the work was to 'help people to feel the men in Manus Island and *take them into the camp to live with us*' (Boochani 2019, emphasis mine). To me, this suggests a move beyond empathy. To be brought into the camp — mapped across various physical locations in Manus Island and Port Moresby in the archive of recordings — is to be brought into relations with these men, so that the torture of time (and of place) is made audible. The sonic intimacy of the clip *the night before last, sitting by the fence near the jungle* insists on a situated listening, one which extends the horizon of attention beyond the frame of the state in order to hear the men on their own terms. As Dreher and de Souza (2018: 21) have argued, it is vital to locate listening 'within embodied relationships, colonial histories, and networks of privilege and power'. Drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young, Emily Beausoleil (2017) construes responsibility

as a responsiveness — a responsiveness that is not oriented towards empathy, compassion or even understanding, but rather a situated ethics of listening grounded in relational responsibility; what she terms a 'dispositional ethics of encounter'.

The ethical imperative of *inviting us in* suggests a response that might prompt listeners to reflect on the ways in which they/we are entangled and complicit with the state's logic. Many of the recording in *how are you today* expose the way offshore detention on Manus is constitutive of, not separate to, Australia's settler colonial border regime and the shifting geographies of violence and displacement central to its re-inscription. *how are you today* is a prompt and provocation to develop a dispositional ethics grounded in the situated positionalities of listeners. The work makes an ethical claim on those who listen in. It insists on a mode of political listening which accounts for the multiple ways we are positioned in and by structures of power (Bickford 1996). For example, the labour and experience of listening to the work is differently modulated for listeners who live within the state's borders but under the duress; for First Nations listeners whose ontological sovereignty exceeds that of the settler colonial state; or for those who refuse—or are refused—the state's conditional epistemological (and legal) frames. For listeners who live under the 'shelter' of the state—even those who may listen, and live, against it — the work insists on staying with the discomfort and tension this listening position invokes.

2

Discourses and narratives of 'crisis' have underpinned refugee and asylum seeker policy on both sides of politics in Australia for decades. From the 'stop the boats' rhetoric of Operation Sovereign Borders to #KidsoffNauru and #BringThemHere to the Medevac Bill and its ultimate repeal, the logic of crisis is used to both defend Australia's border regime in the name of state securitisation, and appeal to humanitarian calls for empathy and compassion. Urgency and emergency construct some refugees/asylum seekers as objects of care and sympathy, while others endure in a state of unending suspension—reminders and

remainders of an always-potential 'threat' to state borders. Framing refugees and asylum seekers in terms of crisis maintains specific ideas about 'about what is politically possible, what is irrelevant, and what we have to fear' (Rajaram 2015: para 3). Yet empathy evoked in refugee-themed narratives 'is often accompanied by a depoliticization of systemic issues' and is also problematic (Khorana 2018: 136). Whether deployed in appeals for empathy and compassion on the one hand, or fear and anxiety on the other, the category of 'crisis' can reinforce the racialised logic that shapes the laws and policies through which movement, migration, 'settlement' and citizenship are secured.

In December 2018, former Federal Member for Wentworth, Dr Kerryn Phelps, introduced into parliament the *Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill 2018* — known as the Medevac Bill. Before its eventual repeal twelve months later, the amendment permitted the 'temporary transfer to Australia of transitory persons on Manus Island or Nauru, and their families, if they are assessed by two or more treating doctors as requiring medical treatment' (*Migration Act 1958*). In her address to the chamber, Phelps emphasised the 'shocking', 'urgent', 'life-threatening' and 'escalating' nature of the medical crisis unfolding on Nauru and Manus Island, and called for the immediate transfer of all refugee and asylum seeker children to Australia for medical treatment (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: 2018). Yet by focusing on figures of vulnerability — sick refugee children, pregnant women, unaccompanied minors and struggling families — Phelps set up a specific kind of rescue politics; implicit within her 'legal and moral responsibility to act' was a distinction between 'guilt' and 'innocence'.

Phelps went to great lengths to assure the parliament — and the public — that the bill would *not* compel the permanent resettlement of refugees, or even their permanent transfer to Australia. Nor, she stressed, did it seek to 'end offshore detention or contradict either of the major parties' stated policies on offshore detention'. Any amended legislation, she insisted, would not let the 'people smugglers win' or invite 'a flood of boats' (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: 2018). Mariam Ticktin (2016: 256) has argued that 'while humanitarianism

is often understood as driven by emotions — compassion, empathy, benevolence, pity — in fact, it relies on a narrow emotional constellation' that necessarily constrains our responses. In the case of the Medevac Bill, those deemed most 'deserving' of humanitarian care were those deemed most worthy of attention. So, while Phelps appealed to humanitarian notions of care and compassion for the 'innocent' and 'vulnerable' (in other words, those deemed *not a threat* to the state), this framing continued, rather than dissolved, the crisis-security nexus and broader conditions and politics that maintain a bipartisan position of incarcerating asylum seekers offshore.

Jackie Wang (2019: 264), in her critique of racialised carceral-capitalism in the United States, has argued that strategies that appeal to innocence become problematic 'when they reinforce a framework that renders revolutionary and insurgent politics unimaginable'. Such appeals, she suggests, 'foreclose a form of resistance that is outside the limits of the law and instead ally ourselves with the state' (Wang 2018: 291). As Jordana Silverstein (2019b: 7) has observed in her work on the discursive framing of refugee children in Australian policy and political debates, compassion and generosity in response to crisis 'relies on the pre-eminence of white feeling, white attachment and white knowledge'. Often those responses can be, and are, used to further enact measures aimed at racist and racialised forms of border and population control (Silverstein 2019a). If the foundation of the Australian state is 'patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson 2015), then an investment in whiteness is structured into whose claims to justice can be heard, and on what terms. Tinkering around the edges of the Migration Act to make it 'more humane' obscures, rather than exposes, this foundational violence and racial logic.

3

As a counterpoint, and counter-archive, *how are you today* shifts attention beyond the immediate temporality of crisis, even though as an artwork it was conceived, in part, as an urgent intervention into an intractable and 'wicked' problem; and even as its form as an archive

indexes other modes of intervention and critique.

The durational nature of the work — its initial creation over three months, as well as its form as a fourteen-hour sound archive — invites us think about what it takes to develop alternative political and social arrangements that might hold and sustain us in relation to others. The labour of listening to the *how are you today* archive — the enforced slowness of it — has a cumulative effect, reflecting the duration and endurance that are features of indefinite detention. On the one hand, many of the clips are pleasing to the ear — at times soothing in their rhythm and repetition, tender in the community and care they reveal. At the same time many of the clips reflect, and reflect on, the brutal conditions under which they are made (for example *Shamindan, yesterday, discussing recent suicide attempts in the camp* or *Kazem, yesterday, talking to Farhad about his health issues at the medical unit*). In this regard it is an unsettling work for the way it orients, holds and sustains the listener's attention. André Dao (2018) writes 'the recordings often require a particularly attentive form of listening, lest we forget what it is we are listening to'.

> *The clip begins with sound of a man clearing his throat. The audio recorder picks up a low, whirring hum—a generator-like sound, or an air-conditioner perhaps. A man sighs. A door closes (or opens) in the background. The man changes position, though it is difficult to identify where and how he is moving. He clears his throat again. Do I hear tiredness in his utterance? Exhaustion? Discomfort? The hum continues—louder now—a maddening presence in the soundscape. A rustling sound of movement again. Another exhale of breath. I hear discomfort, something about the tentative outbreath of air. Then, breathing in. Small sounds of movement. The whirring sound gets louder, more furious, though I still can't place what it is. Two more sharp intakes of breath. A sneeze, two grunts. The discomfort unmistakable now; the strain familiar. Another shift in position. Another clearing of the throat. The rustling of an unidentified object. A sniff, then an outbreath. Two sneezes in quick succession. A big sneeze. Cough. Sniff. Grunt. More movement and rustling. Throat clearing and a pained outbreath. Then inhalation. The 'whir' sound gains speed. Another sigh, this one deeper. Exhale. Cough. Changing position. Sniffling. Throat clearing. The whirr continues. Then, after*

ten minutes, the clip ends.

'Slow violence' (Nixon 2011), 'slow death' (Berlant 2007) and 'slow life' (Median 2018) each develop critical temporalities of slowness to attend to the rhythms, pace, and duration of unevenly distributed structural violence and colonial-capitalist harm, and the uneventful, mundane and everyday acts of endurance that living under these conditions demands. For Rob Nixon (2011: 2), slow violence is 'neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales'. For Lauren Berlant (2007: 759), slow death seeks to make visible phenomena 'not prone to capture by consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact', gesturing instead towards temporalities of the endemic, of 'ongoingness,' of 'getting by' and 'living on'. For Jasbir Puar, in her examination of the protracted pace of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation, 'slow death can entail a really slow life too' (Median 2018: 99). Slowness for these scholars becomes a way of engaging with less direct, less visible (or audible), and less immediately recognisable forms of epistemic or structural harm. Slowness opens a temporal register more attuned to the uneven distribution of debilitation on non-white and poor populations living with the legacies of environmental racism, racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

Following these scholars, the affordances of slowness as a modality of critique allow for both a slowing down (tempo) and stretching out (duration), extending the temporal horizon of attention beyond crisis and beyond the shelter of the state. First, listening to the 'slowness' of offshore detention both challenges and exposes state logics. The Australian state has successfully mobilised refugee suffering, limbo and waiting as a way of justifying offshore detention (vis-à-vis refugees 'waiting' in camps elsewhere). Slow listening is a modality of paying attention that takes seriously this monotony, repetition, and endurance that can be heard in the *how are you today* archive. Second, slow listening is also attentive to the art of making life in spaces of abandonment and disposability (Povinelli 2011), where quiet forms of radical care and interdependence are heard and valued (for example in *Aziz, the*

week before last, consoling his Somali friend with some Somali music or *Shamindan, last week, speaking with Srirangan while he cooks fish curry*).

Parcelled out in ten-minute vignettes, the *how are you today* archive indexes only a tiny fraction of the time the men spent on Manus Island (and later, Port Moresby). Yet it is surprisingly difficult to listen to even a ten-minute sound clip, within or beyond the gallery space. When I presented an earlier version of this paper at a conference on law, literature and the humanities, an audience member responded to my call for slow listening with what seemed to me a mild impatience or agitation — he didn't *have* fourteen hours. I am reminded of another intervention where dissonant temporal registers are brought into stark relief, prompting discomfort and unease. The 2016 Nauru Files Reading was a 10-hour durational performance and vigil that involved the reading of transcripts from a database of more than 2000 incident reports leaked from the detention centre on Nauru and published by *The Guardian* newspaper (Evershed et al 2015). The performance took place in front of Australia House in London — as a challenge to policies of the Australian state, and as an act of solidarity with those held incarcerated in offshore detention sites. The reading of the complete Nauru Files 'produced a sound archive of … everyday life for refugees on Nauru' (El-Enany and Keenan 2019: 48). The Nauru Files Reading was a political protest held in public space, deliberately calibrated to interrupt the 'everyday' urban soundscape in London. Nadine El-Enany and Sarah Keenan — two of the women involved in the action — noted that the 'duration, monotony and repetition entailed in the reading of each file echoed the normalisation of the violence and tedium endured by refugees in indefinite detention' (El-Enany and Keenan 2019: 48). Crucially, the sounds of bureaucratic border violence made audible through the performance could be heard by passers-by, some of whom were, potentially, a resistant listening audience. *how are you today* contrasts with this public hearing, but shares an intention to sound out the conditions of chronicity in a way that unsettles even willing listeners. Perhaps what provoked discomfort in my questioner at the conference was the labor of listening to offshore detention's *longue durée*. Slow listening can be uncomfortable because it pays attention

to this chronicity.

While the Medevac Bill was a legislative intervention made on the legitimate basis of 'urgent medical treatment', it failed to respond to the enforced state of chronic debilitation that is offshore incarceration. The need for urgent medical treatment arises precisely through the debilitating conditions of state-sanctioned punitive expulsion and confinement. The clip described above, *Shamindan, yesterday, in his room recovering from a migraine,* is difficult to listen to. Yet his invitation to listen in, to 'eavesdrop with permission' (Dreher 2009), is crucial here. Listening beyond crisis extends attention to economies of chronic 'incapacitation and debilitation' (Caluya et al 2019: 376); to the slow and deliberate wearing down of bodies and lives. In contrast to the figure of the drowning or sick refugee child, or narratives of desperation and despair which capture public attention and sympathy, *how are you today* is an archive that testifies to what is *not* memorable; what is unremarkably common. In the clip recorded three weeks later, *Shamindan, today, at the medical clinic checkpoint in East Lorengau Transit Centre*, Kanapathi attends the medical clinic checkpoint in East Lorengau Transit Centre. Yet he is unable to see a clinician. The two recordings, listened to in relation, echo Jasbir Puar's incisive critique that 'chronic debilitation' — like the checkpoint — can be a tactic of biopolitical control (Median 2018: 100).

4

The curator notes for *how are you today* suggest it 'opens channels of communication when other forms of speech seem to have been exhausted'. A channel can refer to a communication channel or a sound channel, but a channel also describes a passage of water — and in this sense, the archive opens up a listening route across watery and porous boundaries that challenge border imperialism's hard edges. Turning away from the 'high-pitched drama' of crisis, *how are you today* catalogues the sounds of life lived at the 'lower frequencies' (Elison in Stoler 2016: 7). It complicates and confounds the narrative that refugees and asylum seekers are so often scripted into — breaking the

frame of easy containment through the 'leaky' medium of sound. By attending closely — listening slowly — to the sonic vignettes of daily life, alternative forms of political care and attention might be imagined.

> *The clip begins with the sound of a boat's idling motor gently chugging; the squawk of birds somewhere above. Men are talking to each other in a tone that is friendly, generous. I hear the boat's motor change pitch as it accelerates across the water, the sound of wind blustering the microphone. The men raise their voices over the sounds of movement and speed. They talk together, laugh, raise their voices over the wind; I recognise the joyful sounds of a wooooohoooo! I hear more laughter. The motor shifts back to an idle as the men's chatter picks up, before the motor stops, and the men laugh. The sound of sloshing water; of feet jumping into the shallows. Before long, the motor accelerates again; the sound of the wind picks up. The sound of speed—of movement cutting through air. The clip settles into its own rhythm and pace as the boat carries the men across the water. Then, after ten minutes, the clip ends.*

The devastating impact of Australia's recent history of 'letting die at sea' and the 'active efforts of governments to prevent their arrival on Australian shores' amplify the perils of the ocean for those seeking asylum (Bui et al 2020). This history of deliberate unsafe passage modulates what I hear when I listen to the laughter and lightness recorded in the clip *Shamindan, yesterday, on a boat to Rara Island*. But I am also reminded 'refugee bodies, blocked, disallowed, and terminated, still produce new maps … marking the possibility of other spatial relations and new, as yet unrealized, geographies that confound the territorial trap' (Perera 2009: 70). *how are you today* was forged of, and might help forge, more just relations of attention that are oriented not towards empathy, compassion or even understanding, but gesture instead towards the more difficult, durational and justice-oriented listening (Thill 2018) needed to unsettle Australia's settler colonial border regimes. Taken together, or heard collectively, the recordings that make up the *how are you today* archive tell us something about the conditions of living outside the shelter of the state, and of the very forms of everyday life that endure and resist. While Shamindan and hundreds of others remain in offshore (and onshore) detention[3], *how*

are you today opens a listening route through which to hear what is refused, what remains, and what is still yet possible.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2019 *Law, Literature and Humanities Conference* as part of the panel '*how are you today:* What can we hear beyond crisis, sound, and the carceral on Manus?'. Thanks to Emma Russell, James Parker and André Dao for ideas sparked in that panel and beyond; and to the Special Issue's editors and anonymous reviewers for generous feedback. I would also like to acknowledge the creative and intellectual labour of the Manus Recording Project Collective, and their networks of care and resistance this paper attempts to trace and listen in relation to.
2. While beyond the scope of this paper to fully unpack the racial dimensions of 'nature', it is worth noting the ways in which so-called 'natural' environments are entangled with historical and ongoing colonial projects, including the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and neo-colonial resource extraction.
3. At the time of writing, Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat are living in New Zealand and Switzerland respectively. As with many of the other men moved off Manus Island in 2019, Shamindan Kanapathi and Samad Abdul were transferred to Port Moresby, where they remain. Fahrad Bandesh and Kazeem Kazemi were medically transferred 'onshore' and currently held in so-called Alternative Places of Detention (APODs) on the mainland, at the Mantra Hotel in Melbourne and Hotel Central in Kangaroo Point, Brisbane respectively.

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