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Offshore Detention in Australia: Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*: Writing from Manus Prison (2018)

Abstract: This article focuses on the “Pacific Solution,” the Australian national policy of controlling illegal migration by detaining refugees in Immigrant Detention Centres in offshore Pacific islands of Manus and Nauru, and the human rights issues it raises. It refers to Behrouz Boochani’s prize-winning refugee memoir, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) as both a prison narrative of resilience and a politically resistant text, and it discusses Boochani’s representation of Manus Detention camp as “The Kyriarchal System” in terms of Foucault’s “monstrous heterotopia.” The article emphasises the issues of accountability and responsibility in the bilateral governance arrangements of the Manus Detention Centre between Australia and Papua New Guinea, and considers the possibility of more humane detention practices in the future.

Keywords: Manus Island, Behrouz Boochani, Pacific Solution, Immigration Detention Centres, Australia, deterrence systems, offshore regional processing

1. Offshore Processing Centres and the Pacific Solution

What they have created is a system of deterrents, and indeed a spectacle of deterrence. It says: *This is the purgatory to which you will be subjected if you arrive in Australia without papers.* In this respect Baxter Detention Centre out in the South Australian Desert is not dissimilar to Guantanamo Bay. *Behold: this is what happens to those who cross the line we have drawn. Be warned.* (Coetzee 112–113; original emphasis)

The high profile exposure of the unprecedented influx of illegal refugees from the Global South, often represented politically as a “crisis,”¹ confirms migration as “one of the most controversial areas of policy and practice facing virtually all

countries” (Crawley 25). Attitudes have hardened in most receiving countries into a preoccupation with national security and border controls; detention has become the key component of border enforcement, and Immigration Detention Centres (IDCs), where asylum processing can take place, have multiplied: e.g. throughout the middle east, on Greek islands, and along the US-Mexican border. Small islands are increasingly used as convenient sites for offshore detention practices because their distance from sovereign territory allows for the implementation of often questionable activities. They also provide opportunity for mutually beneficial arrangements whereby the smaller or island country does the dirty work of the rich country in return for a cash injection and the promise of benefits. As Alison Mountz comments, the “partial forms of sovereignty, citizenship and protection on offshore islands [...] provide conditions for exploitation and the undermining of responsibilities of signatory states” (122); furthermore

Islands provide bounded space for the emergence of ingenious new species of asymmetrical economies and governance [...] [as] typically large states make creative use of their small, far-flung and remote island jurisdictions to facilitate activities that would be simply anathema on home ground. (Baldacchino and Milne 488; qtd. in Mountz 122)

Such practices include detaining refugees on these liminal sites to stop them reaching sovereign territory, concealing them from media scrutiny, investing massive resources in deterrence and detention, and privatising detention.

Australia’s hegemony in the Pacific has enabled it to pay the governments of Papua New Guinea and the island of Nauru to manage IDCs on their territory (Fitzgerald 219, 237), and to develop a remote system of control. This does little more than ‘modernise’ their histories of colonisation, Nauru as previously a phosphate mining colony governed by Britain, and Manus, a US naval base. Called the “Pacific Solution,” the nation’s remote detention network as extended to these and other offshore island territories from 2001 – Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, and Indonesian islands – has shown little respect for the international law of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In the Scottish Hebrides, the Isle of Wight and the Isle of Mann are processing sites for refugees arriving by sea from France, and migration management centres exist on Lampadeusa, Malta and the Canary Islands (see Mountz 121–122). All aim to exclude migrants from access to sovereign territory, legal advocacy, information and translation services, media and citizenship support. These modern immigration practices and the globalisation of a system of remote control represent new configurations of sovereign power and neocolonialism in response to heightened concerns with securitisation and border controls.

In the epigraph above, J.M. Coetzee’s character in his novel *Diary of a Bad Year* links the Baxter Detention Centre in the South Australian Desert with Guantanamo Bay in providing a “spectacle of deterrence.” Deterrence justifies the

official attitude in Australia towards maritime refugees implied in the “scapegoating discourse” (van Berlo 3) that frames them as illegals, border threats, criminals or queue jumpers because of arriving by sea without a visa rather than legally by air. Under Operation Sovereign Borders inaugurated by Tony Abbott’s government in 2013, this was also claimed as a humanitarian practice of saving lives at sea by intercepting refugee boats, with tow-back to Indonesia and take-back to Sri Lanka and Vietnam, so allegedly combating the practices of human smugglers (van Berlo 3). The policy of mandatory and indefinite detention of illegal arrivals in offshore islands, first initiated in 1992, has been shared by both political parties because of a successful electioneering tactic: for those on the left an asylum policy assuages fear of foreigners, for the right it provides opportunity to foster and draw on those fears (Moses 2020). The Pacific Solution was first implemented by Prime Minister John Howard in 2001 with a detention camp on Nauru Island, which was closed down in 2007 after reports of sexual and child abuse. Offshore processing continued, however, with the reopening of the Nauru camp in 2012 under Julia Gillard’s government, and a new camp on Manus Island, over which Australia ceded management responsibility to Papua New Guinea (PNG) through a Regional Resettlement Agreement (RRA). Strategies of concealment and silencing included a ban on media, humanitarian groups and researchers from 2012, and from July 2015, a two-year prison sentence for release of unauthorised information by employees or workers imposed by an Australian Border Force Act (Fleay 2016, 83).

These coercive containment strategies for negotiating displacement have been marked by disputes over access, legality, sovereignty, and management, as reports of violence, abuse, and human rights infringements outraged sectors of the public as well as human rights groups. Vigilant civil society watchdog groups in Australia devoted to investigating and publicising the hidden conditions in Manus and Nauru IDCs (Immigration Detention Centres) exposed in numerous leaks to the Australian media cases of self-harm, attempted suicide, death of detainees, and child and sex abuse. The most renowned of these revelations is the award-winning memoir, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018), by Iranian Kurdish film-maker, investigative journalist and writer, Behrouz Boochani. Boochani’s first-hand account of psychological survival testifies to the collective experience of detainees on Manus Island (McDonald 239–240), and is recognised as a significant part of Australia’s hidden history.

Boochani fled persecution in his homeland in Iran caused by his outspokenness as a freelance reporter for Iranian newspapers, notably the Kurdish-language magazine *Werya*, which was raided by Sepah, the paramilitary intelligence agency of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in early 2013, and his support for Kurdish Rights through membership of the National Union of Kurdish Students and the outlawed Kurdish Democratic Party (McDonald 240). After first going underground following the raid on *Werya*, he survived a harrowing sea voyage from Indonesia to arrive at Christmas Island on 23 July 2013 where he asked

for asylum in Australia according to the 1951 Refugee Convention; but as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had passed a law forbidding access of illegal migrants to Australia on 19 July, he and other refugees were transferred either to Nauru or to the newly reopened detention centre in the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island.

Boochani's account attests to the systematic mistreatment of refugees and its psychological consequences in the secretive, claustrophobic "malarial hell-hole" (Kenny n.p.) on Manus island where he lived for 2,269 days in an overcrowded and under-resourced camp, originally designed to house 500 men but by February 2014, expanding to accommodate 1338 (Wallis and Dalsgaard 303). There were suicide attempts, acts of self-harm, and up to seven deaths caused by violence, suicide and medical negligence. The real life – and narrative – climax was a four-day riot in February 2014, in which one detainee, the Iranian Rezi Barati, was killed. The book ends with the camp's closure in October 2017 after the Supreme Court of PNG declared it unlawful, although complaints from workers that they could no longer tolerate working there, were undoubtedly influential. In Manus, as in the Nauru camp which closed in 2018, detainees resisted the offer of release into the local island community because there was no promise of access to Australia. Most remained in camp detention for two more years before being evicted to detention centres in Australia, or deported to countries like USA, Cambodia, PNG, Nauru or New Zealand (FitzGerald 240–243).

Boochani was already known while in detention on Manus for his feature writing in the international media, notably his "Diary of Disaster" (25 October to November 2017) in *The Guardian online* (Whitlock 2018, 179–180). *No Friend but the Mountains* was published to critical acclaim because of its resistant, courageous stance against the state in challenging "the master narrative in Australia political and media rhetoric" about refugees (McDonald 239). In his preface, Australian novelist Richard Flanagan sees parallels with prison narratives like those of Gramsci, Martin Luther King and Oscar Wilde,² and reviewers affirmed its national importance: Robert Manne, for example, insisted that "every Australian beginning with the Prime Minister should read Behrouz Boochani's intense, lyrical, and psychologically perceptive prose-poetry masterpiece" (2). The memoir gained national renown after being awarded the prestigious Australian literary prize, the Victoria Premiere's Award for Literature and simultaneously the prize for Non-Fiction in February (Walhquist 2019). Critics have also focused on its distinguishing features as migrant writing, Chandani Lokuge sees it as an example of the non-citizen genre, by or about asylum seekers concerning the impossibility of belonging to a country (16), while for Willa MacDonald it is the product of the digital age: Boochani, that is, uses contemporary technologies (mobile phones, social media) as a tool for his various creations, including his journalism, and co-directed film *Chauka: Please Tell Us the Time*, shot on a smartphone on Manus and sent to the Netherlands (244, 250). Rita Sakr argues that Boochani's "horrific surrealism" gestures towards a reconceptualisation of sanctuary in terms of relational imaginaries that resist and disrupt the biopolitical border-detention complex (231).

This article will read *No Friend but the Mountains* as a text of political resistance and personal resilience, which challenges the official narrative of victimhood and scapegoating of refugees by which the Australian government justified offshore Regional Processing. Boochani bears witness to the detention facility as a site of psychological torture while simultaneously showing how solace and writing enabled him to reconstruct his identity and establish his sense of self and inner agency. Metatextual features such as the polyvocal introduction, footnotes and afterword also identify it as a new type of mediated refugee writing in which the voices of western supporters reaffirm him as speaking on behalf of other detainees and in order to engage mainstream Australian culture. The article examines briefly the management arrangements of Manus IDC shared between PNG and Australia, referring to Boochani's representation of the fluctuating relations and unstable dynamics between the Australian Security Guards, the PNG security and maintenance forces, and his fellow inmates – minority groups from Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, Rohingya, Bangladesh, the Sudan and Turkey – and finally it discusses the system of IDCs in relation to humanitarian expectations.

2. Manus as Heterotopic Space: Beyond 'Enemy Alien or Captive Ally'

As in Guantanamo Bay, the Baxter detention camp [...] has among its targets masculine honour, masculine dignity [...]. [I]t is intended that when prisoners at last emerge from incarceration they will be mere shells of men, physically wrecked. (Coetzee 112–113)

No Friend but the Mountains' account of incarceration in Manus is one of many witness testimonies of the IDCs on Manus and Nauru islands published by journalists, humanitarian researchers, or citizen activists who overcame the severe constraints on access to provide first hand evidence of cruelty and other abuses, or by employees and whistle-blowers of the contracting companies, testifying to the difficulties of working there.³ It can be read in relation to Judith Butler's argument that "[i]n the politics of immigration some lives are perceived as lives while others [...] fail to assume perceptual form as such" (24) and the question about why asylum seekers subjected to enforcement practices should be seen as less grievable, more inauthentic and their lives more disposable. Boochani reshapes the shadowy and silenced figure of the detained non-citizen into one of resilience and defiance, overturning media stereotypes of the refugee as either a deviant illegal, an agentless victim, or 'enemy alien or captive ally,' with his political poetics and defamiliarising tactics. His account is also a remarkable story of narrative transmission. Written on his mobile phone under conditions of strict surveillance, it was smuggled out as WhatsApp messages to an Iranian translator and refugee advocate in Australia, Moones Mansoubi.

Boochani's representation of the Manus camp and of refugees contained in an "interstitial legal space without citizenship status" (Mountz 121), can be read in relation to Foucault's definition of "heterotopias of deviation" (1984, 5), in which the absolute, finite place of internment dissolves into a range of multiple and disparate spaces, juxtaposed in incompatible ways that fragment the experience of incarceration. Such a perception frames Boochani's testimony to the claustrophobic micromanagement and meaninglessness of camp life. His account also illustrates Mason McWatters' claim, in examining different spatial genres (topic, heterotopic and atopic) in prison, that experience is always in flux "within and between incarcerated subjectivities," and in this "unresolved heterogeneous sense of space" (201) the boundaries between inside and outside blur and invert. That is, Boochani's carceral imaginary presents a dualistic subjective positioning of immersion yet distancing; it includes both the different spaces and buildings that comprise the camp, and exterior locations at its edges – on the roof, over the wall, or on the beach – and it involves cognitive transgression by which "to leave the prison, and imagine the coolness under the shade of a bunch of trees on the other side of the fences" (127). Further beyond is the homeland in Iran to which he returns in moments of solitary reflection.

By contrast is the real life 'return,' which the Australian Immigration Minister urges on the Manus IDC refugees: "either you go back to your countries or you will remain on Manus Island forever" (Boochani 313). The threat of repatriation or refoulement is key to the Australian government's decision to undertake refugee processing in countries like Manus and Nauru which have either not signed up to the UNCHR Refugee Convention or whose limited sovereignty allows this to be overlooked, so enabling Australia to meet its non-refoulement obligation according to the Convention's Article 33. By determining that the Convention does not apply to activities outside its national territory or in international waters, successive Australian governments continued with initiatives like the Pacific Solution and Operation Sovereign Borders to defy the principle that persecuted people should not be repatriated (Fitzgerald 231). The Immigration Minister's alternatives in denying access to Australia – either camp or repatriation – make the spaces of internment on Manus "monstrous" heterotopias that "bring paradoxical arrangements into being, in ways that seem *unreal*" (McWatters 204; original emphasis): "monstrous" appears in the frenzy of violence and self-mutilation that culminated in the four-day riot of February 2014, which is also the narrative climax. Yet Boochani's narrative elsewhere exemplifies the dynamic aspect of heterotopias in its capture of alternative perspectives and reorderings of assigned spaces by his moving out of and back into the official prison places. As McWatters comments, heterotopias have "a diachronic motion" with "a temporal movement of digressions, rearrangements and unsettling (un)becomings" (205), and Boochani rearranges his experiences by finding private spaces, usually at night, on the edges of the compound where he develops through meditation, reflection and writing

the alternative, resilient self-identity by which to contest his powerlessness. This appears in his perception that by exercising creativity he can recover “outlines of hope using the melodic humming and visions from beyond the prison fences and the beehives we live in” (128).

In the epigraph to this section, Coetzee’s character wonders about people who create a dehumanising detention system that aims to strip subjects of dignity in order to make examples of them. Boochani introduces this Kafkaesque world as a grotesque environment of brutality and confinement by labelling the camp as carceral and punitive in its modes of regimentation and use of coercion and surveillance. He defies the terminology of the detention centre arguing, “I [...] do not succumb to the language of oppressive power. I create my own language for critically analysing the phenomenon of Manus Prison” (367): i.e. his name for the bureaucratic label, Manus Regional Processing Centre (MRPC), where inmates are prisoners, and whose *modus operandi* is “The Kyriarchal System.” This term, adapted from the feminist thought of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992), and introduced by Omid Tofighian, Boochani’s Iranian translator (a philosopher based at the University of Sydney), epitomises the operational part of this biopolitical regime: it signifies “interconnected social systems, established for the purposes of domination, oppression and submission” (Boochani 124 n. 6). By exploiting the power of names and labels to unsettle fixed representations of political and official behaviours that help naturalise forms of abuse, Boochani presents his text as the performance of an imaginary of incarceration. Retaliation to the System’s oppressive cruelty is affectively and powerfully conveyed through the imagery and metaphor of poetic sequences: “*The prison is in the middle of a clenched fist/ Now loosening now tightening/on the verge of exploding*” (175; original emphasis). Both mirroring and critiquing the System, he consistently condemns the mentality that uses “systematic torture” (xxviii, 362) and treats refugees as criminals. National and institutional constructions of power and authority implied in nomenclature such as the Australian Border Force or the Regional Processing Centre, are challenged by the label Kyriarchal System that highlights the single aim of the border-detention complex: to force refugees to capitulate to refoulement by making their lives intolerable and providing no alternatives. Official coercion adds a monstrous dimension to the men’s bodies by reinscribing them back into the nations from which they have fled, implying a Sisyphus-like motion of always leaving and always being returned that traps them into the abject.

In “A Translator’s Tale: A Preface to the Mountain,” Tofighian challenges the official stereotyping of refugees that prevents knowledge and understanding of the sort that individual refugees offer either through interview or telling their ‘official’ narrative when undertaking adjudication for asylum status.⁴ He condemns the offshore detention system as a “neo-colonial experiment” (Boochani xxvi) to prevent asylum seekers from entering Australia and as yet more evidence of the nation’s record of indigenous subjugation as found in *terra nullius* and restrictions

on non-white migration through the White Australian Policy. This underlines the irony that refugees recall the Australian myth of origin and the importance of migration to its settlement and nation-building, most recently European migrants and refugees after World War II and the Vietnam War. As Rosie Scott says, “the terrible journeys of an escape from death, starvation, poverty and terror to an imagined paradise – are [...] deeply embedded in our culture” (Scott). Tofighian labels *No Friend but the Mountains* a “decolonial text” (Boochani xxv), committed to deconstructing the Pacific Solution and the practice of indefinite detention with an “empowering knowledge ecology” (Boochani 362) of prison theory. Metatextual features encourage a resistant counter-discursive reading: chapter titles, footnotes, and in the introduction, the outspoken preface by Richard Flanagan, the voices of Boochani’s Australian supporters, and the translators’ political explanations. *No Friend but the Mountains* differs in its philosophical-political orientation from most other refugee narratives of detention, yet it also bears the marks of a distinctively Pacific, 21st-century neo-Gothic regime of horror that demanded all of Boochani’s mental and creative resources to survive.

Boochani charts the tensions and suffering that caused his mental and emotional distress and led him to find a mode of “socio-ecological resilience” (Welsh 15; qtd. in Fraile-Marcos 3) through becoming more rooted in the natural world, turning to memory and to writing.⁵ For, as Michael Basseler argues, “narrative is perhaps the major cultural and cognitive scheme through which notions of resilience are currently generated” (25; qtd. in Fraile-Marcos 10). He dissects the System’s insidious violations aimed at driving the prisoners to extreme distrust and hatred of each other in order to break their spirit. The men become obsessed, frustrated and debilitated by lengthy queues for finite amounts of food, to obtain razors or medication (mainly for malaria, but often causing addiction), to use the toilets, or access the one telephone. In a System dominated by the single goal of deterrence – expulsion from Australian borders and return to their own countries, in defiance of the Refugee Convention and customary international law – hostility, animosity, and hatred (Boochani 165) are strategically fostered: the men become “wretched and contemptible” (358), and develop “perverse habits and sordid and barbaric behaviours” (166). When forms of psychological abuse penetrate the culture and the prisoners descend to the same level as the System by reduplicating its divisive methods, it is most successful. The detainee known as the Prime Minister, because he is “an honourable person and a true leader” (180), openly embarrassed at being seen defecating, is mocked by the Iranian, Maysam the Whore, to entertain the others. Suffering profound humiliation and demoralisation, he asks to be repatriated. ‘Refoulement’ becomes associated with ‘fouling’ by excretion, but at a deeper level with degradation and dehumanisation; as Boochani points out when “ridiculing and joking coincide with humiliation and shame” (185), and when the Prime Minister chooses repatriation rather than to suffer the assault on his dignity, all perpetrators are demeaned, thus confirming a victory for the System.

In “Manus Prison Logic” (Chapter 8), Boochani confirms Manus IDC as a centre of psychological torture by using the discourse of mental disturbance and Kafkaesque perversity. It is a “deranged logic that confines the mind of the prisoner” (208), making them “develop fragmented and disrupted identities and a warped sense of self” (264). Operations are marked by incomprehensibility. No one who works for or is part of the system has any idea of what is going on: “neither the officers nor the other employees working in the prison” (209); in other words, the unequal relations between guards or security forces and the inmates are experienced by the latter as alternative, inexplicable constructions of reality.⁶ As Foucault (2005, xix) says, “Heterotopias: they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance”; the essential illogic of the Kyriarchal System is beyond words: “*A nightmare turned into a reality / A nightmare within the prison / [...] The Kyriarchy produces terror*” (Boochani 168; original emphasis).

In their ongoing mental distress, the men “exhale a raw horror and hopelessness; they hold onto their nightmares, hold the nightmares in their arms, deep inside” (Boochani 146–147). Such states of psychic despair are evidence of prisoner dependency developed through control mechanisms that ultimately offer only one possibility: submission to “the power of rules and regulations” (210). The lack of choice is terrifying for the individual who is left “simply trying to cope” (208) with an extremely oppressive form of governance, for “the harder [he] struggle[s] the more entangled [he] become[s]” (209). Identity fragmentation also comes from diminished agency due to the numerous prohibitions – e.g. all games are forbidden – and hopelessness, despair and disempowerment make the prisoners create “a smaller emotional jail within themselves” (125). The System’s physical restrictions and deficiencies – 400 men crammed into a space no larger than a football pitch, suffocating sleeping arrangements for 130 people in the narrow dark tunnel “P” (in Fox Prison), the frequent breakdown of the generator, the filth of the toilets – normalise suffering and create perversity, “a twisted satisfaction in chaos and destruction” (173). Boochani conveys pointlessness and anger in bestial images and metaphors: the camp is like “a hive of killer bees” being disturbed by a stick (174); when the water fails, or the Oldman generator switches off leaving the men suffocating from heat and plunged into darkness, “it is as if a hot iron hammer has smashed down into the centre”: the prison becomes a “dangerous beast” (177), like a war zone or “a frontline in war” (173–174), with men all over the place, constantly moving around in frustration.⁷ Such menace becomes more ominous where transgression can occur unchecked: the pseudo-private cubicles of the men’s toilets where men mutilate themselves with blue backed razors. Instead of being a sanctuary from “the daily psychological struggles and turmoils of prison life” they “are places for screaming out,” and as “warm blood flows on the cement floor” they emanate an “uncanny sense of awe, an eerie spirit” (170–171).

In official internment the men are known to both Australian security guards and the PNG wardens (referred to in the text as “Papus”) by their case numbers,

but Boochani's alternative naming strategy reflects the interactions that occur in cramped, confined conditions. Personality types emerge and the acting out of roles inspires nicknames based on the men's behaviour. As well as the Prime Minister and his tormentor, Maysam the Whore, the prison "superstar" who performs with his troupe on stage, are the Cow (always at the front of the food queue), the Gentle Giant (Rezi Barati, killed in the four-day riot), the Hero, the Cunning Young Man, The Prophet, The Smiling Youth (Hamid Khazaei who died from sepsis [Robertson]), and the Joker.⁸ This prison culture and community spirit emerge from the men's performance of new subjectivities, which, as their nick-names suggest, aim to contest their powerlessness. Yet for Boochani, the high spirited, ad hoc festivities orchestrated by Maysam the Whore are futile as a "form of resistance" (136): the inmates' riotous, volatile behaviour may appear as a Bakhtinian carnivalesque reversal of the order embodied in the panoptic model of institutional power, but "the pretend celebration and partying" are "no match for the oppression of prison" (147) and the prisoners' condition begins to deteriorate after a few months.⁹ Strategically, he now develops his own method for coping with the System and building psychological resilience.

Dominating *No Friend but the Mountains*' observations of claustrophobia, aimlessness and distress is Boochani's volatile changing subjectivity. His surroundings are experienced as either surreal: "I feel like I am being taken over by multiple personalities – blue thoughts parade through my head, and sometimes grey thoughts. Other times, my thoughts are colour blind" (130), or absurd: he asks, "Does the human mind also deceive so much that it overrides the function of the eyes and nose?" (252). He ensures his psychic survival and access to creative resources by becoming an onlooker, saying that "[i]solation and silence are the greatest gifts I could ask for." He follows his instinct "to create [...] that which is poetic and visionary" (127), and finds a voice in which to articulate processes of dream and memory. This repositioning beyond the chaos into which prison life constantly collapses with its illogic and hysteria enables him to reconfigure reality independently with his Kurdish identity. The present is animated by memories of the past: "here" is interwoven with "there," his homeland in Iran. These disparate states of mind, locations and intersubjective responses are represented through an aesthetic of prose punctuated by italicised, declamatory verse.

Boochani's nurturing of his inner life by changing his surroundings within the zone of incarceration and trauma is crucial to his survival. He undertakes a form of "spatial practice," so-called by Michel de Certeau, out of recognition that space is needed in order to constitute oneself as a subject or to recognise another (1985). Physical spaces of solitude where he can dream, reflect and restore a feeling of harmony enable him to develop meaningful relations with the surrounding island environment. In private refuge, he reinscribes his situated identity as a writer rather than a prisoner by reconnecting to the energies underlying his earlier work as a filmmaker, story teller, journalist. He also overcomes momentarily the sense of

fragmented and disintegrated identity by reconnecting with natural life-forces: flowers, trees, birds and creatures like crabs, crickets and cats; and he draws on memories of his previous life in Iran, recalling sights, scents and sounds as sources of well-being. Fluctuations between his conscious perception and buried memories occur when he climbs up onto the roof of the solitary confinement cell one night, and finds a "refreshing / Sense of calm and the grand feeling of a new self" (255) due to an interaction, "profound in my unconsciousness and the totality of the landscape" (257). Spiritual renewal also comes through sensual perception as when he sits on a piece of a coconut tree, and absorbs the fragrance of "flowers resembling chamomile" away from "the breathing [...], the smell of other people" (294–295). He begins to reconstruct his identity around the texture and taste of freedom, the world beyond, jumping over the prison fence, to enter the jungle and then feels "the softness of sand" on his feet as he approaches the beach (301). After traumatic witnessing of men self-harming in the bathrooms, he retreats "to the space [...] of the coconut tree, to the heavy emptiness of that spot [...] with all the flowers" (319), from where he can taste these moments of freedom again. Other trees, one that "spreads its branches across the whole area" (152), and a thick-trunked mango whose branches "challenge the prison fences" (236), are images of protective shelter and contribute to the "symbolic embodiment of resilience" by which Boochani overturns perceptions of the prisoners' abjection and precarity, as Sakr notes (241).

These solitary reflections, involving an intense perception of elements like sand, wind, palm and coconut trees, can be compared with accounts by other asylum sufferers of trauma: Boochani's inner psychic space of creativity, opening up to these nature-scapes, holds at bay traumatic experiences such as his recurring nightmares of drowning on the perilous journey from Indonesia to Christmas Island, and provides a counter to suppressed memory and pain.¹⁰ This confirms research by Bernardt, von Hoven, and Huigan (214) on the impact of memory practices on asylum seekers in border spaces, that many do not describe trauma, or do so only in general terms. Although his is a discursive identity since he is in a border space, and is reconstructed as a site "between past and present, Self and Other, nation and foreign" (Da Silva 239), he by-passes the conflict caused by unconscious repression of traumatic memories. He begins to renarrativise his life based on the sense of originary loss and fragmentation as a subject whose birthright and Iranian heritage are marked by the dislocations of diaspora and exile: this involves a process of remembering that helps him to embrace his Iranian otherness in ways often associated with displaced subjects of diaspora: in this outsider space he finds a site from which to recover his cultural and ethnic alterity.

The recall of images and memories that Boochani identifies with his Kurdish upbringing and the Farsi language not only distances him from camp life, but also encourages him to acknowledge that dislocation in his case is primordial by asking: "Where have I come from?" and answering "a faraway homeland"

in Kurdistan (258). Displacement and internal dissonance, he recognises, are the essence of his being, because as “a child of war” (257, 258, 264), he was “disintegrated and dismembered, my decrepit past, fragmented and scattered, no longer integral, unable to become whole once again” (265): even his memories are like disconnected islands. His reflections range from the Kurds’ long-term struggle against oppression and they focus on the chestnut oak forest that surrounds his village, which he interprets as a symbol of salvation and sacrifice. A chestnut grove is where Kurdish civilians in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988, caught between the opposing forces of Iraqi Ba’athists (Arab nationalists), Iranian zealots and Peshmerga (Kurdish militia), found asylum, but with the deaths of many “chestnuts became the solace for buried dreams” (259). On one occasion when shocked into mental blankness by witnessing a prisoner being beaten unconscious by guards, he is restored to equilibrium by the swelling sound of the crickets and recall of the chestnut oak forests. These and other cultural images such as the sounds of Kurdish music and memory of folk ballads take him back to “the cold mountains of Kurdistan” (130), with a healing effect. They inspire more encompassing images of the human: the shape of a gigantic, all-embracing female, “a terrifying awe-inspiring woman from the East shrouds the prison compound with her hair” (129), by contrast to the prisoner, imaged as “like a blind mouse with only its sense of smell,” who registers the tiniest change as “bats in a cave that react to the slightest vibration. Every day we repeat, overcome with fatigue an aimless walk of 100 metres” (125). As outsider to the tightly controlled yet explosive community of Fox Prison he imagines himself otherwise, organically, analogous to the chestnut trees and dream of freedom, “like a coconut tree with roots deep in the ground and my hair taken by the wind” (128).

3. The Regional Resettlement Agreement: PNG Guards and Australian Security Forces

Today, as Immigration Detention Centres are increasingly used in managing migration policies and asserting sovereign power, and as their management is outsourced to private companies who compete for lucrative contracts, more attention is paid to the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved in the provision of services (whether private, government employees, voluntary, profit or not for profit). Boochani’s account emphasises the unequal power relations between the different ethnic groups (the Australian service company and contractors and Manusian security guards) who provide goods and services for yet other ethnicities (persecuted groups from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Irani, Pakistan, Somalia, Rohingya, the Sudan and Turkey), with whose language and culture they are unfamiliar. The completely different backgrounds and experience in management of the PNG wardens (referred to in the text as “Papus”) and the Australian guards, many of

whom were returned soldiers from Afghanistan and Iraq or ex-prison wardens and security officers, defines a hierarchy of authority. Boochani notes that the monthly wage of the PNG contractors is equivalent to five days' payment of the Australian officers, whose orders they are expected to follow "without thought or question" (145), commenting that the "papus are basically stripped of autonomy or power" (270). An enquiry into the 2014 riot revealed that many PNG officers were ill equipped for such duties, and not given any training (Wallis and Dalsgaard 304). Boochani confirms that "these people are free spirits. [...] [They] have little care for maintaining order by following prison rules and militarised logic" (144). He sees them as alienated from the corporate culture of the Australian guards: "They wear the scent of the jungle and remind me of fish swimming in the ocean" (145).

Within the prison milieu newly forged stereotypes replace the deceptive, misleading images of the islanders as savages and "cannibals" (Boochani 83), embodying "primitivism, barbarism and cannibalism" (168). Revising and recreating stereotypes constitutes the renaming process that critiques the illogical Kyriarchal System, and inevitably involves polarisation. The Papus evidently overcame Australian stereotyping of the prisoners as "dangerous criminals or terrorists" (167) for "the local people form alliances with us" and "offer us some kindness and sympathy" (145). The Australian guards, from whom the Papus take their orders, by contrast, are "like hostile animals" (142), "watch dogs or attack dogs" (141). Boochani renames G4S as the "Bastards Security Company" because "[y]ou need to be a total bastard to work in a place where you detest everyone" (141). Unlike many other prisoners, Boochani is forgiving towards the Papus for killing his Iranian friend Reza Barati (the Gentle Giant), seeing them as under "the total control of The Kyriarchal System" (332), as showing regret and attempting reconciliation.¹¹

Boochani also stresses the enormous cultural and ideological gap between vulnerable, disempowered migrants and the service officers and guards employed to monitor and control them. His terminology of war and imprisonment indicates how privatisation of services operates globally: similarities exist between the Australian detention system and the US "'immigration industrial complex' which functions with a similar logic and dynamic to the prison and military industrial complexes" (Conlon and Hiemstra 3); that is, with slippages between forms of civil detention and criminal incarceration. As Dora Schriro points out, civil detention, a blend of civil law and criminal law enforcement policy and practice, means holding people only as long as needed to process their applications for asylum, with release into the community as the desired norm. However, Australia's remote control policy is designed to evade the principles of the Refugee Convention and the UNHCR, and practice criminal law enforcement policies. She notes the violation of imposing "correctional policies and practices" (237) on refugees fleeing danger and seeking asylum, most of whom had no previous criminal history, by subjecting them to deterrence-based policies in penal institutions.

In keeping with the upswing in migration, and the rapid expansion of the immigration detention industry globally, Australia outsources operations and responsibilities for a range of services to multiple private contractors. But arrangements for remote control by island countries has led to problems in determining derived responsibility and accountability in official enquiries into management and riots. The RRA with PNG for the governance of Manus was subject to constant change and “fluctuating power structures,” as also happened in Nauru, according to Patrick van Berlo (20).¹² Management was at first in the hands of Serco (Australia) who have had control over all facilities since 2009, and then of the PNG branch of Securitor G4S Australia (a subsidiary of the British multinational private security company G4S), while the Australian government contracted international Health and Medical Services from non-government organisations (NGOs), and humanitarian support by the Salvation Army and the Save the Children Fund until the end of March 2014 (Fleay 2016, 72). The Royal PNG Constabulary provided a mobile squad funded by the Australian government and in 2014, the private corporation, Transfield Services, later renamed as Broadspectrum, became responsible for support and welfare services, replacing G4S while other contractors and sub-contractors were made responsible for health, catering, cleaning and security services.¹³ As van Berlo points out, “power and control are everywhere, not with a particular actor,” and he found that the limitations of a “weak monitoring system and non-transparent processing facilities” (20) means international human rights law is neither the most appropriate nor best mechanism by which to hold actors and agents responsible and accountable.

Subsequent enquiries revealed numerous gaps, coverups and failures in the management system (in the 18 months between March 2014 and September 2015 there were 14 sexual assaults, 213 physical assaults, 740 occurrences of abusive or aggressive behaviour), and it was determined that Manus became a hotbed of violence, physical abuse and rioting due to racial tensions between the different groups, in particular the Iranians and the Afghans, mainly due to ancient feuds (Boochani 124). But undoubtedly a major cause of the anger and dissension that sparked the February 2014 riot, was the revelation that the men’s applications for asylum were not being considered, and that entry into Australia was not an option. The failure to roll out a resettlement plan at that point exposes the lapses in understanding between the main signatories to the agreement, and later it was speculated that Manus governor, Peter O’Neill, may not have understood the long-term implications of resettlement (Wallis and Daalsgard 323). Privatisation and remote control mean that the Australian government is not legally responsible for offshore private contractors, although it bears the management costs; but this became contentious, as Wallis and Daalsgard point out in their analysis of the 2014 riot:

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees regards Australia as responsible for ensuring that the treatment of asylum seekers accords with its human rights

obligations. However, the Australian government claims that “once individuals are transferred from Australia to PNG under RRA the RSD [Refugee Status Determination] processes and the outcome of these processes are solely the responsibility of the PNG Government.” (302)

4. Conclusion: A “Humane Detention” Practice?

No Friend but the Mountains shows how refugee writing can become a focus for the call for social justice: “engage a witnessing public and engender compassion, mobilise shame, and inspire campaigns” (Whitlock 176–177). As a witness account of continued human abuse and survival, it represents in Flanagan’s words, a “profound victory” in showing the value of words in overcoming the system (Boochani ix). The memoir’s publication, with the help of international human rights circles, Australian charities, and refugee support groups, parallels the work of other citizen activists whose resistance to official policies on refugees and asylum seekers has led to protest movements in France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The references in the hybrid introduction to Janet Galbraith, who ran the Refugee Writing group, (*Writing Through Fences*) that received Boochaani’s smuggled texts, and who introduced him to the human rights watchdog Amnesty International, to the publishers, agents and editors, and his Iranian translators and interpreters, align *No Friend but the Mountains* with other texts in which refugee voices are constructed or amplified by intermediaries. This new narrative type that delivers a Western political response to policies of detention and deterrence also defines *Refugee Tales* I, II and III, three volumes of stories co-written by refugees with artists, activists and supporters, whose introductions contain editorial demands for an immediate end to indefinite detention (Herd and Pincus 2017–2019).

Boochani, now a celebrity as the “voice of Manus Island” (Roy 30), is a frequent speaker via livestream at writers festivals and to refugee and human rights groups. He moved to New Zealand on a tourist visa in November 2019, overstayed and was granted refugee status in July 2020 (Moses). Today based in Christchurch, he is affiliated with the University of Canterbury’s Ngai Tahu’s Research Centre, which specialises in Indigenous studies and Maori.¹⁴ Narrating his stay on Manus Island, writing poetry and retelling Kurdish folk tales, enabled him to preserve his sanity in an oppressive toxic regime, while the clandestine textual transmission, translating and coediting of his witness testimony, added another dimension to his psychic resilience. This project, as with all his creative work on Manus Island, his journalism as well as his film, *Chauka: Please Tell Us the Time*, confirms that mobile technologies and social media networks can be used to overcome attempts to silence the victims of offshore detention. They contribute to the acts of bearing witness that are needed in an era of privatisation when groups and actors involved in the detention system – NGOs, other third sector entities, and private

contractors – cannot be held responsible under human rights law because they do not carry human rights duties, and are subjected to government practices and codes of secrecy (Fleay 2016, 83). The impact of Boochani’s smuggled story on receptive audiences and first readers and translators in Australia, whose collaboration ensured its publication, reinforces the symbolic relationship of creativity to survival and identity. Its prize-winning success vindicated the demands that asylum detention policies of these pitiless regimes be revised or revoked. In this context Judith Butler’s observations in *Frames of War* are relevant: although “literature never got anyone out of prison or reversed the course of a war,” it can “provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence” (9–11).

As detention networks and systems around the world expand and proliferate as a primary response to human mobility, the practice of remote control offshore or detention in transit countries will continue as an effective political solution to illegal migration: as a way to control borders, enforce security measures, and assuage xenophobia. Current research, as outlined by anthropologist Julia Morris (51–54), focusing on detention reform to improve restrictive policies, mobilised by a detention rights movement and informed by international human rights policy and practice, acknowledges that such neoliberal endeavours function to sustain rather than question detention. The advocacy of “humane detention” by recommending improvements to facilities and, strengthening governance, as Morris points out, remains intricately in the expansion of the system. Furthermore, if processes like those developed in Australia through the Pacific Solution and Operation Sovereign Borders retain secrecy and concealment measures such as the clauses signed by workers (NGOs), block public access, and use bilateral agreements that blur the ownership of responsibility and accountability, then how much detention reform will be considered acceptable is uncertain.

Coincidentally, due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 the types of policy and practice used in management of detainees are in the public eye more than ever. As temporary quarantine and managed isolation processes at the border have been introduced in many countries as strategies of containment, control or elimination, the skills and training of security forces and border guards with responsibility to manage them come under intense scrutiny as the crucial force holding back the spread of the virus. They provide a powerful contrast to those of the IDCs; unlike the ambiguous, hostile rhetoric surrounding refugees, citizens who arrive at borders for testing for COVID-19, are seen as crucial to epidemiological measures being taken to prevent community transmission, and effective detention for two weeks in these cases is widely accepted as a necessary and essential to ensure community safety and public health.

Notes

- 1 On this term, used to frame people fleeing persecution and seeking asylum in sovereign territory, see Simoes da Silva 248–249, and Fleay 2019, 319–320, 531, arguing that detention is advanced as the resolution to the ‘crisis.’
- 2 Boochani read modernist writing such as Kafka’s *The Trial*, Camus’ *The Stranger*, Beckett’s *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable* (Boochani xxiii), while Iranian and Kurdish literary heritages were also influences.
- 3 See accounts by security guard, Michael Coates, *Manus Days: The Untold Story of Manus Island* (Connor Court Policy, 2018); and Salvation Army worker, Mark Isaacs, *The Undesirables: Inside Manus* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2014).
- 4 On the context of the refugees’ situation see Ganguly-Scrase and Sheridan 252–254.
- 5 Of current thinking on resilience, Boris Cyrulnik argues that it is found half way between the individual and their environment; Marc Welsh contrasts the socio-ecological approach to resilience, based on the biophysical environment-community, to the person-community conception of psycho-social resilience that focuses on the resources of individuals and communities to adapt to change (Cyrulnik, 284; Welsh 15; both qtd. in Fraile-Marcos 3)
- 6 For further evidence of the IDCs presenting illogical parallel universes, see Gleeson 412.
- 7 In interview he says, “We were in a war zone [...] it was like being engaged in a war for six years non stop” (Roy 30).
- 8 Only the names of the deceased are recorded in the account as a mark of memorialisation and respect.
- 9 The well-being of refugees in managed detention declines on average within six months; among already vulnerable people who have survived persecution in their own countries and perilous journeys, forms of self-harm, extreme psychological distress and attempted suicide occur (Fitzgerald 239); on the atrocities on Manus see McDonald 242–244, citing Docherty and Marr 2016.
- 10 In interview Boochani confesses to still having nightmares and unsociable behaviour as repercussions of this incarceration: see Roy 2020, 30
- 11 On the problematic relations between the Manusians, the Australians, and asylum seekers, see Wallis and Daalsgard 307, 309–310.
- 12 PM Kevin Rudd signed the RRA in July 2013, and stipulated that 50% of security forces and 75% of cleaning and gardening be undertaken by residents of Manus province (in fact 68% of contract staff was from PNG).
- 13 On security breaches caused by the RPNGC mobile squad see Wallis and Daalsgard 309.
- 14 In 2021, he is Ursula Bethell Writer in Residence at the University of Canterbury; <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/news/2020/uc-writers-in-residence-2021-vana-manasiadis-and-behrouz-boochani.html>.

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