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Time, torture and Manus Island: An Interview with Behrouz Boochani and Omid Tofighian

Monish Bhatia and Eddie Bruce-Jones

Abstract: Former asylum seeker detainee and journalist Behrouz Boochani (author of *No Friend but the Mountains*) and his collaborator Omid Tofighian speak about the experience of indefinite incarceration on Australia's Manus Island and the psychological toll of waiting. They compare this form of detention to prison and the existential impact to torture. This Kyriarchal System, they argue, strips the individual of identity and humanity and they explain how such a system can perhaps be better questioned through the poetic fiction that Boochani has used in his path-breaking narrative than to appeal to dry rational facts and figures.

Keywords: Behrouz Boochani, Chauka, immigration detention, Kyriarchal System, Manus Island prison, *No Friend but the Mountains*, Omid Tofighian, torture.

After over six years of incarceration in Australia's notorious offshore prison camp on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) Behrouz Boochani managed to escape to New Zealand and attend the 2019 Word Christchurch Festival. He was invited due to the success of his multi-award winning book No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison (Picador 2018) and used the invitation to orchestrate the flight out with the assistance of friends and supporters. In early 2020 Boochani (via video connection from Christchurch) and his translator and collaborator Omid Tofighian (in person) were involved in events and activities in numerous places including the UK and Ireland. On the 21st of February No Friend but the Mountains had its first London book launch at Birkbeck, University of London with Boochani, Tofighian, Sarah Keenan, Nadine El-Enany, Monish Bhatia and Stewart Motha as speakers, and chaired by Daniel Trilling. On the 11th of March, approximately one week before lockdown due to COVID-19, Tofighian visited Birkbeck again where he connected with Boochani for an interview by Bhatia and Eddie Bruce-Jones.

MB & EB-J: Behrouz, we would like to begin by asking you about time and temporalities and how it is experienced by those held at the Manus Island prison camp?

BB: Time is one of the key concepts in my works. Time—that is: you don't know how long you will stay in indefinite detention. The system is aware of that, and the system is using this to torture people. In all of my works, you can see this. Even in the movie, the title is "Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time."ⁱ So, Chauka is a native bird, and the local people and the elders believe that Chauka is telling time. One of the things that they say about Chauka is that the local people even actually understand time through Chauka's singing. So, in the book, Chauka is one of the characters. In the movie, Chauka is the main character and that's why I think it's very important and I focused on this just to show the importance of time. Also, time is the key concept that we can use to compare Manus prison camp with other prisons around the world. The prisoners know how long they must stay in prison because they go through a court system [and sentences are determinate]. But on Manus Island, we were not aware. We didn't know. I think that is the difference between prison and Manus prison camp. A prisoner knows that he must stay in prison for 10 years, five years, 20 years, the rest of his life. But on Manus, we didn't know. And that's why you would always have to wait... wait, wait, wait. Even inside the (Manus)prison system, you had to wait...in the queue. You had to wait to get food. You had to wait to access medical treatment.

In the book, I explain this further...how the medical system is used to put people on some list, A, B, C, and just ask them to wait to see the dentist. You know, wait for a ship that is coming to bring us things, you know. So, waiting is the key concept, and actually is the keyword and concept through which we can understand the soul of the system. It is, I think, not only on Manus Island. It is throughout the Australian detention industry. And the important thing is that this system never answers our questions. It never answers our questions because they think that if they tell us how long we have to stay there (or answer other questions that we have), they lose their power to control us. Even the uprisings of February 2014 that happened on Manus Island, when Reza Barati was killed, it was actually because of this. We had a question: 'how long must we stay here?' And they said, 'We don't know.' I mean, we were protesting for two weeks just to get an answer from them. And the answer was 'We don't know how long you will stay here.' They never gave us the details. Even later when they accepted to send us to the US, still, they actually put us through another system wherein we had to wait. So now, still, people are in Port Moresby, some people. And still, they are waiting for the US to give an answer. So, waiting is the main concept. Yeah, if you want to understand this system, it's that. The system has control of us because of this. Yeah.

OT: Can I add two points to this? Behrouz explained really well. It's...especially how time is used with other instruments or other techniques of torture. So, one of the things that I think really struck me in Behrouz' book and his...also in his thinking in general is the way bad faith is used as an instrument of torture. So, this coincides. This can only operate and this can only be successful in terms of torturing people when it's combined with the notion of waiting. So, bad faith is about misleading people, not giving an answer or giving them misleading or ambiguous answers, and not being clear about exactly what kind of procedure, what kind of rights, what notion of rights they have claim to...I mean, this idea of bad faith I think works really well with other forms of torture and instruments of torture, especially waiting as an instrument of torture. The other point is the idea of Chauka in the book as a hologram. So, in the film, Behrouz uses Chauka as a sacred, beautiful and hopeful idea, the symbol for the Manusians, but it's also the name of the solitary confinement cell in the prison for the refugees. So, it has this hologram...a hologram feature to it. But what's important for me was how Chauka or the notion of time in Manusian culture and the erasure of time for the refugees both exist within a kind of wider idea of colonial time. So, even though the Manusians have this connection with their culture and their folklore, their heritage through Chauka, it still exists in colonial time. Because even though they've gained independence, they're still controlled by Australia and dictated by the notion of time and history. Yeah, operated by Australia.

BB: Yeah, the system actually reproduces this torture, so that we have a big question about how long we stay in the prison. How long? So, there is a long period of waiting. That is the main question. But they are not only using this. They actually reproduce and spread this torture in our daily lives—staying in the line and waiting for access to the medical system, waiting for your results, your process. So, for example, for the US processⁱⁱ, you would have to wait for an interview. Then after that, after your first interview, you would need to wait for your second interview, and after that, a third interview. And after that, you would wait to get the result. And after that, you would wait for when they would take you from Manus. After that, you would wait in the hotel in Port Moresby for the flight. You know, it is like this. They reproduce this, you know, in different ways. So, a detainee on Manus Island has to wait for everything. Now, I know some people who have been waiting for two years to get results while their friends are, you know, flying to the US. And they shouldn't have to wake up every day and wait, you know. It's like this: you are in a desert and you are waiting for someone to come to you.

OT: The example of the US refugee swap deal I think is an excellent one in relation to bad faith as well.

BB: Yes, but the US deal was only one of the many examples. We were waiting for the election in Australia. We were waiting for motions getting passed in the Australian parliament. For example, once they [Labour and Green Party] introduced two motions in the Australian Parliament to accept the New Zealand offerⁱⁱⁱ. So, we were waiting for the election [and for new government to take over]. We were waiting for a year, for two years, for three years. We were just counting the days until the election. And then we realised that the election result was against us [laughs] I think it is the soul of this system, time.

MB & EB-J: This question shifts the topic a bit. We wanted to ask about the language and the importance of calling Manus a prison and calling this torture, because I think it's really important to use that language. And I know that it's very clear in *No Friend but the Mountain*—that this is a prison we're talking about. It's torture. It's a system. It's intentional. In your writing, you intended to get across the intentionality of this system in doing damage to people. How it intentionally breaks them down, wears them down. And the language that you're using is also intentional, to show how the system wants to destroy people's will to go on. And I'm just wondering what choices you felt like you needed to make because it's so clear, what you're saying. Did you encounter any points where you thought, 'Okay, I can use this language to describe it, but I can't use that language.' Or how did you come up with a way to describe the system?

BB: Yeah, language is very important because, you know, actually, the government created some terms and concepts. And unfortunately, the media and the organisations, I mean, the humanitarian organisation or any official source or any official person or organisation always uses the language of the government. So, the government says that, 'Oh, this place is an offshore processing centre,' which is a place that they say is supposed to process us, to determine whether we are refugees or not. But in fact, it's not that. Some of the refugees created another term. Instead of 'offshore processing centre' they called them 'offshore processing torture'. I think the words have power.—The words are related as much to power as to the concepts they describe, and we should be careful at how we use them. So, I don't know that I am successful or not in creating my own way of describing things, but I try to create some concept to represent our situation, to represent this tragedy, you know? I don't know whether I was successful or not, but I always challenge the system through the concepts. So yeah.

MB & EB-J: So, in the book, you describe a great deal of physical and mental suffering. Thinking about the journey to Manus as well as on Manus, what the relationship is, for you, between physical and mental well-being.

BB: The physical and mental suffering was a big thing in Manus. Those people who had physical problems, when they released them and sent them to the US, after a while, they got better. So, the physical problem disappeared. And I think that all of this is actually created by the system. And even the self-harm, when people self-harm, in fact, they were reflecting the violence that's created by the system. So, the nature of this violence is coming from the system, but we say that, oh, a refugee or a detainee has done self-harm. But in fact, it is the system that produces this violence. And another thing I think is very important is that the role of medical practitioners and IHMS as a company...IHMS is a company called International Health and Medical Services. So, IHMS is a system that is the biggest and main part of this systematic torture. So then, we can talk about the security companies and the guards, you know. But people who look at us from outside, they think when we talk about torture, they imagine physical torture that comes from the guards and security. But I think the main torture first comes from IHMS and the doctors and nurses and the psychologists who were working there. So, the main torture is mental torture, not physical torture.

MB & EB-J: Could you say more?

BB: The interesting thing is that it is possible that some of the people who are working in the system, I mean, in the medical system, are not aware that they are torturing people. They think that they are helping people. So, just imagine the role of a psychologist. A psychologist speaks with the detainee, talks with him about his background, about his mental situation, about his daily life, about his perspective towards the world and gets lots of information and in the end e-mails this information (to the immigration department) because they have to do it. It is a part of the agreement. They must e-mail this information to immigration services. So, imagine immigration, everyday receives lots of information, and so, they know their detainees. So, they can plan. They can plan how to torture people, they know which people are weak, which kinds of policy that they are running in the prison have the most impact, negative impact, on people. So, what they are complaining the most about. In fact, the medical system is like this: imagine that you torture someone physically and he becomes unconscious. And the role of medical system is to pour water on your face just to wake you up, and they torture you again, and you become unconscious. The role of medical system seems not to provide medical treatment, they just want to keep you alive, keep you alive in this system, keep you alive to suffer, you know. The system continues to torture you.

OT: You know, Behrouz, once you said something really interesting, and we haven't discussed this in any detail after you said—you explained this, but you said—that the system is designed not like, for instance, other camps throughout history that are designed to actually exterminate people or to kill people. **BB:** Exactly, exactly.

OT: This system is designed so that you're constantly living under the threat of death or with looming death, which is a really interesting shift in the way camps are designed.

BB: Exactly. You know, if we compare this system with, you know, concentration camps in Nazi Germany—camps that were, in my understanding, designed to kill people. But in Manus Island and Nauru, the system...or in Australia, the system is not designed to kill people. The system is designed to torture people and keep them alive to torture them again and again. So, that you, as a detainee, always, at any given moment, feel death, you know? You feel death, always. So, in Manus especially for people who were sick, it was a big, big fear that people had, that they would possibly die because of a small infection. Or they could die because of a heart attack. And those people who died in Manus Island, actually, they died through the bureaucratic system, the medical bureaucratic system. So, lots of people died, or were killed by the system. And, the important thing here is that when someone killed themselves, the government or the system would say 'he killed himself.' So, he committed suicide. But in fact, I think it's not that. In fact, it's the system that has killed this person, you know. The system. We should talk about this. In Australia, I know it is a big claim, but I have been working with lots of people in detention in Australia. In Australia, what they do is they keep people in indefinite detention for five years, four years, six years. Some people spend 10 years in indefinite detention. Here, the psychologist plays a role. When the psychologist...because they always report, everyday. So, the psychologist in the system becomes sure that if we keep this man or this woman in indefinite detention, if we keep this person in there longer, there will be a high risk that he or she kills themselves. Then, when they reach this point, they release the person into the community. And that person kills himself in the community after six months, after a year. And by that time, no one cares. The media does not report it, they don't care. Well, the media says, 'a man today killed himself in Brisbane. A man killed himself on the Harbour Bridge in the Sydney.' But in fact, he was actually killed by the system, it just happens that he was no longer in detention.

OT: Maybe I'll add to that bit just very briefly. This kind of violence is not only directed at the people within the system but the people who are related to the people caught up in the system. So, people's parents die overseas. People's sisters and brothers and children die overseas. You know, there are...there's the kind of exporting of this kind of violence from the system that affects people who are related to the prisoners. So, you know, in many ways, you see the system operating by extension or killing people by extension.

MB & EB-J: Would you use the term "ripples of violence" to describe this? How it expands outwards to a broader circle of people?

BB: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

OT: I'm just going to add one thing about IHMS as well. And I think that the fact that they are an internationally recognised reputable health service or a company dedicated to health working in a detention centre – but they operates while deflecting accountability. So, on paper, you see that they (detainees) are served three meals a day. They have medical services. They have these other facilities. They have a place to sleep. There are guards protecting them. So, this is a really interesting design, a way to basically avoid any accountability, and to erase or confuse any kind of evidence for systematic torture.

BB: Yeah. So, if someone investigates this, the system, by looking through documents, you know, they will still not be able to understand the system through the documents. Because on paper, the system keeps everything clear. Because if you look at the documents, you can see, oh, they give us three meals each day and they give us meat, vegetables, everything. They provide medical treatment, you know. They protect us—all of these things. But in fact, that is not the reality. **OT:** You need a special critical eye to see it. And I think rational approaches, but strictly rational approaches, won't expose the system. I think you need a combination of creative, intellectual, and even I would say historical approaches. So, what your book does is offer us an alternative narrative that doesn't depend on this kind of rigid and almost aggressive form or rationality.

BB: I am writing a short piece talking about this, about music.^{iv} One day, the guards came to Manus and they took a guitar—a broken guitar—from a prisoner. And when the detainee was complaining and was asking, 'Why are you taking my guitar? Give my guitar back,' they said, 'No, there is no way. Those are the rules.' When he followed them and continued to ask for his guitar and ask for a reason, the guards said, 'we are taking this guitar because it is possible that you kill yourself with this guitar, you know, with the wires of the guitar.' So, if you look at this story, lots of people accept this, you know. Lots of people say, 'Oh, okay. Well, they wanted to protect him. He's in detention. So, they're taking that from him so that he doesn't kill himself because...but in fact, that is a, you know, that is a *logical reason or rational justification*. For everything, they have a reason. Now, in Australia, they say that, oh, we send these people (citizens) who are suspected to have Coronavirus to Christmas Island (immigration detention centre). And when you ask them why, they say because 'We want to protect our country'.. But in fact, they have a medical system in Australia. So, they can do it, you know. Lots of countries don't have islands. So, I mean, in this system, they have some logical reason for everything.

You know, on paper, people read the documents and accept it. But that is not true. Because anyone who wants to kill himself is able to find a way. It's easy to kill yourself. But in fact, that guitar... Actually, they took something from that man that he relied on it to survive. And they took it from him to make the situation worse, you know, to torture him. For example, for six months, they didn't let us take food from the mess or dining area or anything dairy, you know. They didn't let us take food, and we

were starving. And when we asked them why, they said, 'Oh, Manus is a tropical area. So, if we let you take food, you will keep the food there and the food will poison you, you know. It's dangerous.'

Yes. But after six months, they let us to take food in, and we were taking food for five years, and no one died because of poison, you know? Well, it is stupid. They have lots of reasons for lots of stupid things. It is the mentality of this system.

MB & EB-J: In your book you have used the term "Kyriarchal System" – could you explain its relation to the Manus prison camp?

BB: Yeah, I think that is the main part of the book. That is actually the soul of the book. I was writing the book just to explain this, how this Kyriarchal System works. And you can see, the Kyriarchal System is a system of domination, and the system that tries to control you by reducing you to some number or a mechanical existence.. So, in fact, they are taking your freedom. They, you know, put you through a bureaucratic system. And they actually take your identity. So, identity is the key concept here that in end, the system drains that...it takes your identity, your humanity. But...and so, how does it do that? It creates a situation where you hate others, and you are in competition with others, and you forget about your values. When you are living under harsh conditions, you know, it's really hard to keep your values alive, keep your humanity alive. And that's why in the book, you can see that if we accept the storyteller is me—because it's not clear that it's me when I say "I", you know. It can be any detainee, you know. Whoever is telling this story has this hateful feeling towards others. The narrator is quite aggressive. He criticises others, you know. Why? Because the situation is this: the situation is created to divide our community, the situation is designed to put you in competition for a small thing or silly things, and reduce you to a very low form of human. So, it's that. The Kyriarchal System is that

MB & EB-J: Okay. So, how can they dismantle the Kyriarchy? Do you think it can be dismantled?

BB: So, I don't know whether we can dismantle the system or not, but we can play with it. So, as an example, Maysam The Whore is the kind of person who actually, in fact, doesn't break the rules. But he is playing with the system through performing, dancing, singing...and the system, they didn't design for or they didn't predict a man like him. They created rules for "normal people," not a person like Maysam The Whore who is performing, dancing, and actually playing with the system.

MB & EB-J: He is a really important character in the book?

BB: And he enjoys himself. He creates free moments. He spreads joy and happiness to the community. But the system didn't predict a person like him. For example, this example is from real life. When you are in an airport, they are searching your body, you know. So, for a few seconds, you should just...you are like a passive person in front of the system at that moment? So, you can...if someone dance there like this, in fact, they cannot sue you. They cannot say "why you are doing this?" Because they didn't predict this. They didn't make a rule that you can't dance. You are not breaking the rules if you are dancing or you are singing or you are making jokes with the person who is searching your body. It is only a small example. But in the book, you can see, you know, the role of nature. The role of nature and how detainees feel...rely on the nature, on the tropical nature in front of that system. So, my perspective is that we should, as much as we can, play with the system in a creative way, and not follow what the system expects of us. That is my experience, but I don't know about dismantling the system in a philosophical kind of way. But I think...we can challenge the system in the way I described.

OT: Maybe just one idea that came to mind as you were speaking is that, so, Behrouz is dedicating so much of his energy, so much of his time to writing a novel, you know. You...for a lot of people listening from or watching from the outside, they would ask, you know, wouldn't someone in a prison be occupied with getting free, finding freedom, you know, trying to work out a way to ensure their release, to expose what's happening? Why would a novel be the kind of primary focus for somebody like that? And one of the things that came to mind was that for Behrouz to actually challenge the system in a rational way, to sort of find statistics and data and, you know, to go through the bureaucratic system and to appease the system and to follow the guidelines, he knew that this place is not designed for people to go through it smoothly, to come out of it unscathed. A logical, rational approach isn't going to be the best way to challenge it. So, instead, he tried to find a way to subvert the narrative. So, kind of what he calls the soul of the system. And it seems that after many years of working towards the release of the book and winning the award, suddenly, as a result of a number of different things aligning together, a crack appeared, a rupture appeared. And now, you know, there's just so much collective action around the world using this and leveraging it to expose, disrupt, and transform in a sustainable way. So, nobody expected a work of literature, a work of art, to actually be able to do that. And now, we've identified maybe a new way of doing politics as a result of it.

MB & EB-J: To touch on the writing process a bit more. I mean, the genres that this book crosses, which is amazing, that it's in different genres. And like you said, we don't know who's narrating it necessarily. It could be you, or it could be someone else. I guess the first question, maybe also a little out of order, is that we know that you have a background as a journalist. And very early on in the book, we encounter the journalists at the airport, and, you know, the narrator is very upset with these journalists, for obvious reasons. So, there's kind of this tense dynamic between journalism and the novel, as form. And then, there's also the poetic text that is alongside the more conventional prose text. So, I'm wondering how your background in journalism, the poetic text, and the prose of the novel all played together in telling the story.

BB: Yeah. I think there may be a lack of something in this book. So, one could say that the way that I wrote this book is not the most powerful way. So, we can criticise it. So, we cannot, in some ways, interpret this only as a strength, you know, that this book is anti-genre. We cannot understand this book as a biography, as a travel writing, as a novel, or as an academic text or as reporting. We cannot understand it this way, we cannot categorise this book. I think that can be a weakness, you know. So we can not necessarily say that it is powerful because it is the anti-genre, you know.

So...but regarding the journalism, you know, you can see in the book that I have a problem with journalism—when they exiled us to Manus Island, the way the journalists and the photographers approached us... They were using the cameras as weapons, you know, as weapons. They did not care about our identity, our humanity, they just took photos. In a way, they are taking a photo from a jail, you know. But we were human. So, I understand it in this way. But in the airport scene that you mentioned, I think that also represents our situation in a country like Iran—that it's possible for someone who is a journalist to leave the country at 30 years old and have nothing to take with him. He only has himself, his clothes and his will.

Interview ends.

ⁱ Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time is a documentary film co-directed by Behrouz Boochani and Dutch Iranian filmmaker Arash Kamali Sarvestani, and was released in 2017. For more information, see: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/chauka>

ⁱⁱ For more information about the Australia-United States resettlement agreement, see:
<https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/australia%E2%80%93united-states-resettlement-arrangement>

ⁱⁱⁱ More information here: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-australia-asylum-refugees/australia-should-accept-new-zealand-offer-to-resettle-refugees-unhcr-idUKKBN1DE02T>

^{iv} Boochani, B. (2020) "For the refugees Australia imprisons music is liberation, life and defiance." *The Guardian*. Translated by O. Tofighian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/07/for-the-refugees-australia-imprisons-music-is-liberation-life-and-defiance>