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Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*: A Call for Dignity and Justice

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ABSTRACT

Since 2001 Australia's offshore processing regime has turned asylum seekers into one of the country's main destitute groups. No asylum seeker trying to reach Australia by boat is allowed to settle in the country. If their boat is intercepted by the Australian Navy in Australian waters, they are forced to turn back, or are forcefully transferred and indefinitely held in Nauru and Papua New Guinea until their refuge applications are processed. This article focuses on the testimony of one of these asylum seekers who was held in one of the detention centres on Manus Island: Behrouz Boochani's memoir *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018). It explores the author's condemnation of the oppressive kyriarchal system on which the Australian detention regime is founded, and his embracement of the environment as a form of resistance against it. Contrary to the pejorative stereotyped images often used by governments and some mainstream media to justify their anti-immigration policies, Boochani's first-person account reminds us that asylum seekers and refugees are not disposable objects, but active agents who should be treated in a more humane and ethical way all around the world.

KEYWORDS


refugees; offshore processing; Behrouz Boochani; Manus Island; zoe

Introduction

Writing is a duty to history. . . . This issue must be understood as the annihilation of human beings, the incarceration of human beings within the history of modern Australia.

—Behrouz Boochani, "I Write from Manus"

The issue to which Kurdish-Iranian refugee writer and activist Behrouz Boochani refers in the epigraph is Australia's offshore processing regime, whereby asylum seekers arriving at its shores are denied permission to enter and settle in the country. Instead, they are forcefully transferred to one of the immigration detention centres in Nauru or Papua New Guinea, where they are indefinitely held until their refugee status claims are decided.¹ Several Australian governments have maintained these restrictive border control measures, starting with the approval of The Pacific Solution policy initiated by John Howard's

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coalition government (1996–2007) in August 2001. After Kevin Rudd’s Labour government (December 2007–2010) stopped the “offshore processing of Australia’s unauthorised asylum seekers” during his tenure, the policy entered a second phase under Julia Gillard’s government. Transports to Nauru were resumed in September 2012, when the reinstated Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, “signed [the] Regional Resettlement Arrangement (RRA) with Papua New Guinea” in July 2013.² This asylum policy was even stricter than the original Pacific Solution for it did not allow the resettlement in Australia of those who had been sent to Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The deterrence policies hardened with the establishment of the military-led border security programme “Operation Sovereign Borders” under Tony Abbot’s Liberal Government in September 2013.³ The main aim of this operation was to intercept those who attempted to reach Australia without a valid visa, which, it goes without saying, a forcefully displaced person could not have procured in advance. In April 2016, the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruled that Australia’s detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was illegal. As a consequence, the Manus offshore immigration centre was shut down on October 31, 2017. Around 600 detainees, among them Behrouz Boochani, refused to leave because they had no guarantee that their already neglectful situation would improve in whatever place they’d be transferred to, and decided to remain in the detention centre. However, between November 23 and 24 2017 they were forcefully transferred to other centres on Manus Island (East Lorengau Transit Centre, also known as ELTC, West Lorengau Haus and Hillside Haus).⁴ By June 30, 2021, 125 of them were still in Papua New Guinea and 108 in Nauru, living under highly precarious conditions.⁵ The ongoing enforcement of Operation Sovereign Borders had made it very hard for asylum seekers to be granted the right of asylum in Australia.⁶

Behrouz Boochani himself was a victim of this system. Boochani is a Kurdish-Iranian journalist, writer, film-maker and scholar, who fled Iran on May 23, 2013, for fear of being persecuted and arrested by the Iranian government for his participation in the Kurdish language magazine *Werya*.⁷ He travelled to Indonesia intending to reach Australia later on in search of freedom of speech and international protection. In July 2013, the Australian Navy authorities intercepted the sinking boat carrying him and 74 other asylum seekers. Contrary to their expectations, none of them was given the possibility to apply for asylum in Australia. Instead, they were transported to Christmas Island where they were held for one month, and then forcefully transferred and indefinitely held in one of the offshore detention centres on Manus Island.⁸ Boochani’s defence of his writing as “a duty to history” in “I Write from Manus,” published in *The Guardian* in December 2017, was also a dire warning against the injustices the detained asylum seekers continue to be subjected to, as a consequence of Australia’s offshore policy, enshrouded by a veil of censorship and forgetfulness. As J. M. Coetzee,⁹ Claudia Tazreiter,¹⁰ and Dolores Herrero in the article included in this volume, have argued, since the enforcement of the Pacific Solution, the Australian government has approved several legislative measures whereby all workers on the island are forbidden to circulate any photographs or information about what goes on in the detention centres. The absence of such information, together with the geographical remoteness of the islands, has condemned both the place and its detainees to utter invisibility.¹¹ In an attempt to breach this censorship, Boochani insisted in his article on the need to look at the history of Manus “from the viewpoint of people who [like himself] have been subject to [the] systematic violence” of the immigration detention centres, and

whose voices the government has tried to marginalise. “The history of these prisons, on these islands,” he entreated, “must never be forgotten.”

Following his public outcry, Boochani published several other articles in, among others, the Australian *Saturday Paper* and *The Washington Post*—as well as literary works and a documentary film, *Chauka, Please Tell us the Time* (2017), codirected with Arash Kamali Sarvestani, in which he records and denounces the dehumanising policies to which asylum seekers detained on Manus Island were subjected. This article focuses on his celebrated memoir *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018). Written in Farsi it consists of thousands of text messages sent on a smuggled mobile phone to his translator Omid Tofighian. The book narrates Boochani’s voyage from Indonesia to Australia, his one-month detention on Christmas Island, and the cruelties he suffered and witnessed on Manus from his arrival on the island till the prison riots in February 2014 and the shutting down of the centre in October 2017. His memoir has been widely praised by both the general public and academic literary circles, to the point that it won Australia’s highest awards in January 2019: the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Victorian Premier’s Prize for Nonfiction.¹² In Boochani’s words, winning these meant “a victory not only for [asylum seekers and refugees], but for literature and art and above all, it is a victory for humanity.” He saw it as “a victory for human beings, for human dignity. A victory against a system that [had] never recognised [asylum seekers] as human beings” and had “reduced them to numbers.” The fact that “his words” in the book had allowed him to deliver his acceptance speech to people who were outside the borders of Manus, demonstrated the liberating power of literature, that “words are more powerful than the fences of this place, this prison.”¹³ Richard Flanagan described *No Friend but the Mountains* as “a miracle of courage and creative tenacity” in his foreword to the book.¹⁴ He highlighted Boochani’s overcoming of the physical and psychological barriers of the prison and praised the literary and insightful quality of his memoir. Similarly, Brigitta Olubas regarded it as possibly “the most important work of Australian literature to be published this century” thanks to “its poetic and locutionary force,” adding that it deserves all the attention as “it tells the larger truth of Australia’s policy of offshore detention.”¹⁵

In keeping with Olubas’s statement, this article examines Boochani’s description and critique of the complex physical and discursive structures that rule the Australian offshore detention regime. It first looks at Boochani’s categorisation of the offshore detention centre as a kyriarchal prison, and then analyses his approach to the island’s ecosystem and local culture as a form of resistance against the system.

Manus as kyriarchal Prison

In his memoir and in all his publications, Boochani refuses to use the misleading terminology of the Australian government to refer to the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre and instead renames it the Manus Prison. “Renaming,” as Omid Tofighian, its English translator, argues, is Boochani’s political tool to “affirm his personhood” and thus defy the prison’s authority over him and the other detainees.¹⁶ By using *prison* instead of the government’s euphemism, Boochani brings to the fore the deprivation of liberty and the criminalisation to which the asylum seekers forcefully held in these type of centres are subjected.

However, he is also aware that *prison* cannot fully encapsulate the complexity of the brutal regime of the island: unlike the detainees on Manus, Boochani has argued, ordinary prisoners have “some rights,” such as receiving family visits, the right to a trial and to a lawyer.¹⁷ Lacking an appropriate term to define the place, he adopts the term *kyriarchal* as the central concept around which to develop his understanding of the Australian offshore regime.¹⁸ According to Boochani, “the Kyriarchal System” that rules Manus prison “is a complex set of structures that subject imprisoned refugees to relentless and pervasive practices of micro-control and macro-control.”¹⁹ The continuous and unchallenged exercise of such forms of oppression makes them appear normalised, not only to those who reside in the prison but also to those who live outside it. The kyriarchal rules of the prison and the people who enforce them can continue working with impunity, as long as the system remains enshrouded in its unquestioned appearance of normality. In *No Friend but the Mountains*, Boochani seeks not only to bear witness to the atrocities suffered by the asylum seekers on Manus but also to submit to scrutiny the kyriarchal prison’s practices of oppression and submission.

Negative stereotyping is one of the main discursive strategies the kyriarchal system uses to keep everyone whether inside or outside the prison under surveillance. Boochani shows that the enforcement of this practice precedes even the asylum seekers’ arrival on the island. As soon as they are rescued and taken to Christmas Island, they are subjected to the state’s biopolitical power over both their bodies and their identities: they are locked in a wire-fenced and high-walled building and treated as if they were “criminal[s] or murderer[s].” All their movements remain under the surveillance of the CCTV cameras and the Australian officers’ “securitised gaze[s]” (81, 86). Similarly, their “helpless and fragile” bodies become the target of the journalists’ cameras, both at their arrival on Christmas Island and at their departure from its airport. Boochani describes the journalists as “vultures,” and accuses them of being complicit with the Australian officers responsible for transporting them to the prison on Manus (92, 94). On his departure from Christmas Island, he is given a pair of flip-flops and oversized clothes, and his name is replaced by “the number MEG45.” He feels he “has been transformed into someone else.” All this has turned him into “a crushed person,” “someone extremely degraded,” “someone worthless” (96–98). In Alain Badiou’s terms, the state authorities and media have succeeded in making Boochani and the other detainees forget their personal identities and submissively accept their “destitute” status, that is, the belief that they “counted for nothing.”²⁰

The aim of this erasure and criminalisation of identity is to “strike fear” (93) into both the Australian general public and the asylum seekers themselves. This fear fulfils several functions, depending on the particular group it is meant to affect, be it Australian citizens, asylum seekers and refugees, or the locals living on Manus Island. As regards the first group, fear is part of the securitising discourse used by Western states, including Australia, as an electoral strategy. According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, governments use the criminalisation of migrants and the subsequent approval of strict border control policies as a way of convincing their citizens that they are the main safeguards of their security and prosperity. At the same time, Bauman also points out that the pejorative portrayal of asylum seekers contributes to “the ‘adiaphorization’ of the migrant issue.” In other words, it moves the asylum seeker’s plight and the host country’s violation of the human right to seek asylum away from the Western citizens’ “moral examination.”²¹ By projecting a negative image of asylum seekers they are cast as a potential danger to the nation,

which prevents citizens from feeling any compassion for them or questioning their own “morality” and their government’s response. This, then, was probably one of the goals the media gathered at the airport of Christmas Island sought to achieve: Boochani, indeed, doubts that any of the potential media spectators at his departure from Christmas Island “shed a tear” (98).

On the other hand, he is also well-aware that Australian citizens are not the only group the government and the media seek to scare: “the deal” between “the government’s dirty politics” and the journalists is that he and the other asylum seekers “have to be a warning, a lesson for people who want to seek protection in Australia” (92). This means that the asylum seekers themselves are the other main group to whom their own media images are addressed: just as these images can prevent Australians from feeling any empathy for them, they should also deter any potential asylum seeker from travelling to Australia by boat in search of refuge, seeing that, as happened to Boochani, the destiny that awaits them there is no other than imprisonment.

Yet significantly enough, the detained asylum seekers are not the only ones in the prison to whom fear-inducing labels are attached. Before arriving on Manus Island, the Australian authorities take advantage of the asylum seekers’ lack of knowledge and limited access to information about the local ecosystem and culture with a view to implanting a frightening image of it in their minds: They are told that “the Manusians are cannibals” (83) and are warned about the multiple “potential dangers . . . that may threaten their health” (86). Similarly, the locals working in the prison are misleadingly informed that the asylum seekers are “dangerous criminals and terrorists,” “expatriated prisoners” who “at any moment . . . could initiate something dangerous and attack” (167). This form of breeding fear in the two groups, as Boochani explains, opens up an unbridgeable distance between them that prevents any kind of alliance against the system.

In addition to these negative discursive practices, the kyriarchal system employs a method of queuing to guarantee the enmity among the interns. There is a queue for food (189–208), for cigarettes (214–17), for the telephone (217–21) and for medicines (304–7). Although at first sight, these queues appear to be the best way to ensure the well-being of the prisoners—each of them is designed to satisfy the prisoners’ basic needs (211)—their effect is quite the opposite. Queuing is, according to Boochani, a form of “torture,” as it prompts the “hostility,” and “competition” between prisoners that the kyriarchal system demands (189, 165, 199). For example, the food provided is not equitably distributed: it is only those who manage to arrive first at the queue who can get the most “desirable” and largest amount of food, thus leaving only “junk” food to the ones still waiting behind them (197). Furthermore, some of the products for which the prisoners have to queue, such as cigarettes, paracetamol and sleep tablets, create new addictions, which increases their dependency on the system. Queuing, as Boochani reports, turns them “into puppets on a string” (190), devoid of any capacity to act according to their own will.

Thus it is not surprising that the rule that governs the prison is: “you shouldn’t rebel. Just submit to the power of the rules and regulations” (210). The kind of actions for which the asylum seekers are most severely punished suggests that the most inviolable rule is the unwritten ban on raising or showing any sympathy or compassion for any other person living on Manus. The disproportionately violent punishment inflicted upon the asylum seeker, “The Father Of The Months-Old Child,” at the telephone queue for not

being allowed to talk to his father, is a good case in point. On the one hand, this scene shows the guards' lack of compassion for the detainees' suffering. When this detainee is informed that his father is about to die, he goes to the telephone queue to call and say his last farewell. Given the urgency of the situation, he asks the other interns standing ahead of him to let him jump the queue. The asylum seekers immediately sympathise with him and agree to let him call his father. However, as soon as the Manusian and the Australian officers see this, they stop him by arguing that jumping the queue "would be a violation of the rules, which is not possible, unfortunately." Despite their refusal, one of the prisoners, "The Man With The Thick Moustache," does not give up and keeps trying to convince them to let "The Father Of The Months-Old Child" talk to his father by appealing to their "sense of morality and sympathy." The pressure that all the prisoners exert on the officers is such that they are forced to turn to "The Boss." The Boss finally appears surrounded by "an escort of ten or twelve heavily built officers." At first the "detailing rhetoric of the love and affection of fatherhood" by The Man With The Thick Moustache seems to sow a grain of compassion in The Boss, who tries to appease The Father Of The Months-Old Child by "put[ting] his hand on [his] shoulder." However, The Boss subsequently refuses to allow him to jump the queue by displacing any blame that might be put on him onto his higher-ranking boss: "I'm sorry, it's not in my hands. The Boss has given orders. It's just not possible," he argues. His rejection suggests that no type of language—be it one "of fury," "of resistance," "of violence" or, rather "of love" and "affection," such as used by the asylum seeker—can weaken the rigid regulations and bureaucratic hierarchy that sustain the kyriarchal system of the prison (224–28).

On the other hand, the scene that follows reveals the kyriarchal system's reliance on violence as one of its main strategies. When the asylum seeker is informed of his father's death, he bursts into tears and openly blames the cruelty of the system for not allowing him to talk to his father for the last time. Unlike the previous scene, in which The Boss showed some sympathy for him, on this occasion he shows no mercy whatsoever: he turns up at the prison's telephone room accompanied by an excessive number of officers, who "violently forc[e] [him] into submission" and "transpor[t] [him] to the solitary confinement cell called Chauka" (229, 230). The message the kyriarchal system strives to convey to the other detainees by resorting to this punitive measure becomes clear when it is pitted against the system's passivity against the infringements that other asylum seekers, such as "The Cow,"²² commit against their inmates in the food and the bathroom queues (200, 202, 214). As Boochani puts it, the system's message is: "whoever wants to endure less suffering must live like The Cow. Eat. Sleep. Don't come up with questions" (210).

Another feature of the kyriarchal system that this telephone scene brings to light is its constant reliance on a hierarchy of an unlimited number of unequally ranked employees. This topless social ladder makes it impossible for the detainees to find the right person to whom to address their concerns or identify as the one responsible for their precarious situation. This "in-infinitude" of Australia's incarceration asylum system, as Joseph Pugliese suggests in "Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality," is the key "distinguishing feature between the imprisonment of the criminal and the refugee." While the criminal is aware of the temporal limits of his/her sentence, "the refugee, in contrast, is incarcerated with no articulated sentence marking the borders and limits of their confinement." As he goes on to argue, the refugee's "sentence is governed by a bipolar

spatio-temporal logic”: whereas the fences of the detention centre confine the refugee into a fixed limited physical space, “the indefinite nature of their detention” extends the period of their sentence into “a temporal open-endedness that knows no limits.” The refugee’s incarceration is thus an “imprisonment in-infinity” which, because of its ungraspable nature, increases the refugee’s anxiety and suffering. Thus, to Pugliese’s reflections on the “spatio-temporal bipolar” logic of the Australian immigration centres,²³ Boochani adds the bipolar/paradoxical nature of the system’s rules and regulations. On the one hand, the hierarchy of the prison’s officers, together with its rules and bureaucratic procedures, make it appear as a rational regime whose workings the refugees may eventually understand, and thus somehow control. On the other, the entire system is shrouded in secrecy and subjected to sudden changes. This clearly undermines the refugees’ hopes and mental health (214): indeed, they are often so weak that many of them despair and engage in self-harm (288–89, 316–19).

Finally, the system’s annihilation of the prisoners’ minds and bodies runs parallel to its persistent destruction of the island’s ecosystem. The beginning of the construction of another building on the western side of the island, which entails the progressive logging of trees and whose final use the detainees are totally unaware of, coincides with the rumours about the arrival of some lawyers. These rumours raise the prisoners’ hopes that they will be eventually released and allowed to find refuge in Australia (148). The result, as it turns out, is far from it. When they meet the lawyers, they are forced to choose between two equally undesirable options: either “to submit a case for refugee status and settle on the island, or fill out a voluntary deportation form” and be returned to the place they fled from (290). Similarly, the beginning of this construction gives rise to a series of speculations about the type of building to be built and the people who will inhabit it, which Boochani gradually reveals at the end of chapters 6, 7, 9, and 10. In tune with the prisoners’ shift from a state of excitement to one of disappointment once they finally meet the lawyers, the more trees are cut on the western side of the island, the more pessimistic become Boochani’s speculations about the function of the enigmatic building. By conflating his description of the kyriarchal system’s destruction of the ecosystem with that of the asylum seekers’ forced incarceration, Boochani condemns the capitalist/imperialist policy of the prison. In Moones Mansoubi’s words, Boochani highlights “how domination and control are related to aggressive extraction and manipulation of natural resources, the destruction of the ecosystem, and exploitation of human bodies.”²⁴

3. A Movement towards Zoe

One month after the Manus camp was shut down on October 31, 2017, *The Saturday Paper* published Boochani’s letter in which he explained how the 600 refugees who had refused to be transferred to another camp managed to survive for 22 days without electricity, water, or food supplies. In his manifesto for refugee resistance,²⁵ Boochani regarded the “natural environment,” “animal world” and “ecosystem” as the refugees’ main source of power, inspiration and freedom: “we hope[d] that we could make its meaning, beauty and affection part of our reality.”²⁶ His appeal to this alliance with the environment as a form of resistance conforms with feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s notion of the ethics of environmental equality. According to Braidotti, “life” consists of both *zoe* and *bios*: *zoe* refers to the biological aspect of our being, which we share with animals, and *bios* to our

“half-political and discursive” or cultural aspect. On the basis of this distinction between *zoe* as the irrational half and *bios* as “the intelligent half,” western imperialist discourses have generally justified the colonial civilising mission by attaching *zoe*-qualities to the colonised subjects, while presenting themselves as those closer to *bios*. Instead of seeing *zoe* and *bios* as two “competing notions of life,”²⁷ Braidotti stresses the potential vitality of *zoe* and our inherent connection and dependency on it. The revitalisation of *zoe* as a source of vitality, she argues, can contribute to questioning the pejorative marginal position to which *zoe*, and those attached to it, have been relegated. Furthermore, just as Boochani and his fellow refugees find sustenance and inspiration in the “natural environment” and “animal world,” Braidotti believes that the shift from an anthropocentric vision of human beings as unitary subjects to one that regards them as “non-unitary” opens the possibility for “new alliances” and “trans-species solidarity,” which can challenge and undermine the commodification and exploitation encouraged by globalised capitalism.²⁸

In keeping with these ideas, Boochani opts to ally himself with the local culture and environment as a way of defying the prison’s system. This alliance is illustrated by the contrasting symbolic meanings the ocean and the jungle acquire in the memoir. On his first days on the island, he has a recurring nightmare in which he re-lives the moment when his refugee-loaded boat is rescued from shipwreck. He describes the boat’s rescue and his subsequent transportation to an island “encircled by dangerous waves,” where he encounters a group of children “terrified” by the sheer force with which they break on the shore. All of them, including Boochani, try to save their lives by putting their arms around “the tall coconut trees growing on the island.” However, the waves rise much higher than the trees, to the point that they end up “swallowing up” the island with all its human and non-human inhabitants (119). That all of them end up drowning in his dream invokes a symbolic barrier between the jungle and the terrifying ocean, which at this point is perceived as the unbreakable border they should have never dared to cross. Yet, in the end, Boochani manages to overcome his fear by embracing the generative power of *zoe*, which allows him, in Braidotti’s words, to experience “new sensorial and perceptive capacities of powers, which alter or stretch what a body can actually do.”²⁹

Similarly, one night he decides to ignore the official warnings about the threats the detainees may encounter on the island and fearlessly climbs over the fences of the prison into the jungle in the hope of crossing it and finally reaching “the ocean and its waves.” He becomes “part of the jungle,” and “like the snakes, like the frogs, like the insects, like the birds” starts moving towards the beach. It now seems that the symbolic barrier between the ocean and the jungle gradually dissolves, the beach becoming a liminal space from which he can see both the jungle and the ocean from a new perspective. Now that he is outside the prison, he acknowledges the “magnificence of the lost island in the expanse of ocean.” Although “the infinite greatness of the ocean,” in clear contrast with the “humble” island, still seems to instil in him some fear of the ocean, he decides to “walk along the beach,” removing his flip-flops to allow his feet to become one with the wet sand, and to let his “toes and the space between [them] feel the greatest freedom.” This is his first attempt to reclaim his own identity, especially when we recall that he was forced to wear them when he first arrived on Christmas Island. When he starts walking, he “can imagine the footprints of a mortal man who has taken a long trek, the trek of freedom, the trek of mutiny,” even though he is unable “to see [his] footprints in the sand” (301–2). His self-identification with this nameless “mortal man,” together with his use of the words in

search of “freedom” and “mutiny” suggests that, although the tide, like the Australian government’s censorship measures, may end up erasing those footprints on the sand, it is through the alliance with the natural environment and the acknowledgement of the stories and lives of those who, like himself, have sought refuge in Australia, that freedom from oppression can ultimately be gained.

Boochani’s alliance with zoe is also seen through his stylistic use of the genre of the fable, as in narrating the event in which one of the detainees, “The Cunning Child,” tried to “steal” a mango from the Mango Tree, in what was known as Little Kurdistan, and had to grapple with two Kurdish antagonists, “The Joker” and “The Gentle Giant” (236–42). As a provider of food, the Mango Tree challenges the prison’s kyriarchal system in several ways. Rather than their usual submissiveness, the unreachable fruits at the top of the tree motivates them “to use [their] intellect.” Furthermore, the exchange between the tree and the detainees is not based on a market economy whereby only the richest or strongest can get the fruit, as occurs in the prison’s food queue, but on an economy of gratitude and generosity. Thus Boochani does not describe the asylum seekers’ retrieval of the mangoes as their individual success, but as the result of their strong alliance with the natural environment: it is thanks to the birds that approach the tree to catch and eat some of its fruits that some of these end up falling to the ground. The mango that the Cunning Young Child grabs is described as the tree’s “gift” to him. By offering it to the child, the tree, Boochani suggests, might be “test[ing] the humanity of the prisoners.” When The Cunning Child catches the mango, The Joker and The Gentle Giant react in opposite ways, the first “like a schoolboy with a devilish grin,” and the second by offering the mango to the Cunning Child “with his childlike generosity.” Unlike the other Kurdish asylum seekers, the Gentle Man does not treat the child as if he were “a foreigner” and offers him the fruit without expecting anything in return. Following the conventions of the fable, Boochani attaches some of the natural features of the Mango Tree to the Gentle Giant: just as the majestic tree elicits feelings of “joy,” “tranquillity” and “goodness” in those who stare at it, the Giant’s gesture towards the Child causes the other Kurdish prisoners to remain “silent” while preventing the child from feeling fear. Through his generous gesture, the Giant thus “challenges” the exclusionary control the other Kurdish detainees keep over the Mango Tree and its fruit; in other words, he “confronts them with a different way of being, he offers them new horizons, access to a better reality” (236–41).

Boochani’s discovery of zoe is also manifested in the many references to the Chauka bird in his account of life on Manus Island. According to local tradition, there are three reasons why this bird sings, “death, birth and honesty.”³⁰ The occasions on which the bird sings throughout the book foreshadow the deaths of two of the most honest asylum seekers detained on Manus, that of The Smiling Youth (Hamid) and that of the Gentle Giant (Reza) (292). As a result of the media attention given to their unjustifiable deaths, they are the only two prisoners whose real names Boochani reveals in the disclaimer: “The Smiling Youth” is the moniker he uses to refer to Hamid Khazaei, aged 24, who died from a bacterial infection contracted on Manus Island. The lack of proper medical facilities necessitated his evacuation to Port Moresby and then to Brisbane. However, since he lacked the necessary visa, his evacuation was delayed, so that by the time he arrived at Brisbane’s Mater Hospital his condition was so critical that he died a few hours later.³¹ Boochani describes Hamid as a kid who always smiled at everyone and everything. His

mistake, Boochani suggests, was that he trusted the health system of the prison (308–9, 326).

“The Gentle Giant” stands for Reza Barati, aged 23, who, like Hamid, died as a result of the system’s negligent behaviour and brutal policy: during the prison riots in February 2014, he was beaten to death by the guards.³² Boochani narrates their deaths in the last chapters of his memoir. And although they appear to point to the triumph of the physical and psychological violence that governs the prison, Boochani’s allusion to the constant chanting of the Chauka in the poem that closes his memoir implies that, despite everything, there are some voices the prison cannot silence.

On the other hand, Boochani invites us to associate the song of the Chauka also with birth, through another recurrent cry—the asylum seekers’ unrelenting moaning for their mothers. In the Kurdish tradition, he explains, there is a strong, unbreakable, bond between son and mother. Their attachment transcends physical and temporal borders, to the extent that the Kurdish son can always feel the presence and protection of his mother (349). In fact he included his poem, “Our Mothers, a Poem for Reza,” in the article published in *The Guardian* on the fourth anniversary of Reza’s death, the last line of which describes how, when the asylum seekers’ lives were taken, all of their mothers stayed there, “all together, all mourning, all chanting, the deepest Mour.”³³ This “mour” or lament expresses not only the mothers’ pain over the loss of their sons, but also their call for justice. Similarly, at the end of *No Friend but the Mountains*, Boochani includes a poem in which all the voices of those who took part in the 2014 riot, The Hero” (the leader of the revolt in Fox Prison), that of “Chauka,” that “of a bird,” and that “of a man,” “blen[d] into one.” The last two lines draw a parallel between “this lamentation of nature” and the “lamentation of the human being” so that the moans and the calls for justice of the Chauka, the asylum seekers, and their mothers extend to encompass humanity as a whole: “this lamentation of nature” is the “lamentation of the human being” (356). Through this final act of collective mourning and protest, Boochani vindicates the asylum seekers’ humanity, dignity and agency that were deprived from them by the kyriarchal system.

Conclusion

Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains* is an example of the alternative and liberating vision the incarcerated refugees of Manus Island can paradoxically provide those on the outside. As Omid Tofghian states in his closing essay of the book:

[T]here is an island isolated in a silent ocean where people are held prisoner. ... News somehow enters the prison about another island where the mind is free to know and create. ... The people on the other island have special insight: they see things that the prisoners cannot, they create things the prisoners cannot, and they certainly know things that the prisoners cannot.³⁴

In a reversal of our expectations, the “isolated island” where the prisoners live is not Manus but the “settler-colonial state called Australia,” whereas the island whose inhabitants are free-spirited people is that which “contains Manus Prison.”³⁵

Despite the negative stereotypes of asylum seekers and despite the censorship imposed by the Australian government, Boochani’s memoir bears testimony to the atrocities suffered by the asylum seekers detained on the Manus Island. It exposes the

main strategies of control used by the kyriarchal system of the prison: the criminalisation and breeding of fear of the Other, whether human or non-human, along with the use of violent measures and the enforcement of unequal rules and regulations. Boochani's book is a powerful denunciation of the harmful effects of all such measures, together with the indefinite duration of their incarceration on the mental and physical health of the detainees. Moreover, it suggests that the only way of overcoming the blocking effects of this alienating system, is to establish a trans-cultural and trans-species alliance. The freedom he feels on his walk along the beach and the new horizons the Gentle Giant opens up for the other detainees through his generosity, together with Boochani's affirmation of the Manusian and Kurdish cultures—all these suggest that an atmosphere of fear and violence can never be the answer to complex human problems, as it is only through the open encounter with the Other that a freer world can be built.

At the end of his Letter from Manus, Boochani offers a short list of what all people, regardless of their place on the planet, need more than anything else:

Feelings of friendship

Feelings of compassion

Feelings of companionship

Feelings of justice

And feelings of love.³⁶

The figures who embodied these principles of human dignity and justice were the island's ecosystem and asylum seekers such as The Gentle Giant and the Smiling Youth. It is no wonder that, in Boochani's closing poem, the Chauka and The Hero's lamentations for their deaths become a lamentation for humanity as a whole. Through his memoir, Boochani urges us to join their voices and put an end to the inhuman treatment of refugees and asylum seekers across the world.

Notes

1. See Refugee Council of Australia, "Australia's Offshore Processing Regime."
2. Fraenkel, "Australia's Detention Centres," 279.
3. See Refugee Council of Australia, "Australia's Offshore Processing Regime."
4. Amnesty International and Refugee Council of Australia, "Until When?" 18, 51.
5. According to the Australian Border Force, as recorded on the Refugee Council of Australia website, 4,183 people were transferred to Nauru or Papua New Guinea from August 13, 2012 to July 14, 2019. For more information, see the Refugee Council of Australia, "Offshore Processing Statistics."
6. According to Article 14 of the UN 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.
7. Boochani was co-founder, editor and journalist of *Werya*. On February 17, 2013, the magazine's offices were raided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and 11 of its journalists were arrested. Fearing imprisonment, Boochani decided to flee Iran. Cf. Popescu, "Behrouz Boochani."
8. Boochani was held on Manus for six years. In November 2019 he was able to leave the island thanks to the 30-day-visa he was granted by the Government of New Zealand to participate

in a Christchurch literary festival. In 2020, he was granted asylum and is currently working as writer in residence at the University of Canterbury. For more information on Boochani's life, see Zable, "Iranian Journalist"; Doherty, "Day of the Imprisoned Writer"; Popescu, "Behrouz Boochani"; Whitting, "Refugee Behrouz Boochani"; Byrne, "Behrouz Boochani"; Sydney Writers' Festival, "Behrouz Boochani" and *Overland*, "Author Biography."

9. Coetzee, "Australia's Shame."
10. Tratzier, "The Emotional Confluence of Borders," 5–6.
11. *Ibid.*, 5
12. Boochani's book also won a Special Award of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards (April 2019) and the General Fiction Book of the Year at the Australian Book Industry Awards (May 2019). Cf. Matthews, "Boochani Bound," 60.
13. Boochani, "Behrouz Boochani's Literary Prize Acceptance Speech."
14. Flanagan, "Foreword," vi.
15. Olubas, "We Forgot Our Names."
16. Tofghian, "Translator's Tale," xxvi.
17. Boochani, "For Six Months I was Jesus," 4.
18. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 124. Hereafter page numbers are cited in the text. The term "kyriarchy" was first coined by the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992.
19. Boochani, "Manus Prison Poetics/Our Voice," 528.
20. Badiou, *Our Wound*, 36.
21. Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, 23–25, 35.
22. The Cow "is always the first person to enter the dining area, and this is the reason for his nickname." He is described as a person who "seems to construct his sense of self through disturbing others" (Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 199, 202).
23. Pugliese, "Penal Asylum."
24. Moones Mansoubi, together with Sajad Kabgani, worked with Omid Tofghian as their translation consultants. Moones Mansoubi's cited words are included in one of the conversations Omid Tofghian held with Mansoubi during the process of translating Boochani's work, which he transcribes in "Translator's Tale," xxv.
25. The Australian weekly, *The Saturday Paper*, published Boochani's letter as "a poet's manifesto for the refugee resistance" (Boochani, "A Letter From Manus"). Other critics who have used the term "refugee manifesto" are Surma, "In a Different Voice," 518; and Olubas, "We Forgot Our Names" and "Where We Are Is Too Hard," 3.
26. Boochani, "A Letter from Manus."
27. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 37, 38.
28. *Ibid.*, 99. Braidotti defends the same stance in *The Posthuman*.
29. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 103.
30. Boochani, "For Six Months," 17.
31. See Thompson, Tozer, and Harley, "Manus Island"; Rebgetz, "Hamid Khazaei."
32. Anderson and Ferng, "The Detention-Industrial Complex," 470.
33. Boochani, "Four Years after Reza Barati's Death."
34. Tofghian, "No Friend but the Mountains," 359.
35. *Ibid.*, 360.
36. Boochani, "A Letter from Manus."

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