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Behrouz Boochani and the Manus Prison narratives: merging translation with philosophical reading

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ABSTRACT

No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison is a literary work typed using mobile phone text messaging and produced after five years of indefinite detention in the Australian-run immigration detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Behrouz Boochani's Manus Prison narratives represent the fusion of journalism, political commentary and philosophical reflection with myth, epic, poetry and folklore. By experimenting with multiple genres he creates a new literary framework for his uncanny and penetrating reflections on exile to Manus Island and the prison experience from the standpoint of an Indigenous Kurdish writer. In addition, the narratives he constructs function as political and philosophical critique and expose the phenomenon of Manus Prison as a modern manifestation of systematic torture. Drawing on scholarship from social epistemology, this article emphasises the situated nature of Boochani's writing and the interdependent way of knowing uniquely characteristic of his positionality. This study also demonstrates, from the perspective of the translator, the interdisciplinary nature of the translation process and indicates how a particular philosophical reading was required, particularly in order to communicate the work's decolonial trajectory. The Manus Prison narratives depict a surreal form of horror and are best described in terms of anti-genre: the stories redefine and deconstruct categories and concepts; they resist style and tradition; and they show the limitations of established genres for articulating the physical, psychological and emotional impact of exile and indefinite detention on refugees.

KEYWORDS

Behrouz Boochani; Manus Island; Refugees; Diaspora; Displacement; Exile; Transnational; Epistemic Injustice; Standpoint epistemology; Kurdish resistance; Kurdish literature; Prison writing; Philosophical literature; Iranian Literature; Australian Literature

The prison had fallen into a heavy silence; the prison had fallen into heavy sleep. Only the sound of crickets; they hollowed out the depths of silence even further. The very great weight of the silence had infused the moaning with a destructive power.

My god, prison is so horrific. Prison is so oppressive. Prison is so merciless. (Boochani 2017a, 97)¹

Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* (forthcoming 2018a) is a book that merges various genres and, paradoxically, deconstructs them at the same time. The author employs the journalism skills and political analysis we are familiar with from his reports from Manus Prison, in addition to incorporating special elements of the edifying and lyrical voice that speaks through his poetic manifesto 'A

Letter From Manus Island' (Boochani 2017b; see also, Boochani 2018b, 2017a, Boochani 2017c). We are also introduced to Boochani's philosophical ruminations, his psycho-analytic examinations and his vivid description of dream states – sometimes glorious, sometimes romantic, at times humorous, often horrific. The book also incorporates styles of writing that are best understood as epic and mythic. *No Friend but the Mountains* is a novel – rather, more than a novel, it is an anti-genre.

Reflecting on the phenomenon of mixing and manipulating genres, Boochani explains different forms of expression and their relationship with knowledge production. When telling me about the conditions he endured when writing his manifesto, he examines how he intertwined three genres: epic, political commentary and poetry:

This is what is so fascinating about the text. It brings all these together with a particular philosophical trajectory. I learned so much from the process, and then from looking over what I had written. I realised that one can bring together all these forms of expression and make them work successfully. Reconstructing voice taught me something special... both employing and deconstructing writing structures taught me more about the prison. (Behrouz Boochani, personal correspondence)²

In the book's supplementary essay, 'No Friend but the Mountains: Translator's Reflections', I suggest that, considering the burgeoning cultural industry around refugee stories (part of the broader 'refugee industry'), it is misleading to reduce Boochani's book to refugee memoir or other forms of refugee writing. The work is better positioned within a range of collections, such as clandestine philosophical literature, prison narratives, philosophical fiction, Australian dissident writing, Iranian political art, transnational literature, decolonial writing and the Kurdish literary tradition (Tofighian, forthcoming 2018b). In the same essay, I draw on scholarship from social epistemology and narrative studies to examine the treatment of refugees by states and divergent elements within their constituent societies; of course, with a focus on Australia. In particular, I define what Boochani and I see as the *pro-refugee/anti-refugee disposition* and what we call *The Kyriarchal System*, or *system-e hākem* in Farsi. In this essay, I will also use concepts and theories from the same scholarship to explore issues pertaining to the reception and the book's philosophical underpinnings. In the translator's note (Tofighian, forthcoming 2018a), I describe the translation project as a shared philosophical activity. This particular process of translation – a form of collective knowledge production – developed new knowledge; translation enabled a way of knowing distinctly different to what I would have acquired from a deep reading. This essay shares aspects from my insights and continues to develop what Boochani and I describe as *Manus Prison Theory*.

Manus Prison, Narrative and Knowing

As a location, a system and an ideology, Manus Prison creates tortuous conditions that affect all forms of interaction between the incarcerated refugees and their oppressors, whether they are staff employed by the system, politicians or Australian citizens. Manus Prison is constructed on one of Australia's former colonies, an extrajudicial site where men seeking asylum are warehoused. But the oppressive circumstances and cruel political strategy have also created conditions where many of the imprisoned refugees

have formed unique and methodical ways of thinking and produced particularly savvy analyses of the political situation and the ways it determines their fates.

In my conversations with Boochani, he builds on revelations acquired from resisting through the 23 day siege (beginning 31 October, 2017) to re-examine significant parts of his book. After being forcibly removed from the original prison and transferred to a new prison camp, he meditates on factors, such as space and time:

Now that I'm no longer there I cannot write about what I endured and what I saw. The siege has ended, and the brutality and affliction particular to the four and a half years leading up to it are different during this current phase of incarceration. For instance, in the book I write about queuing as a technique of torture – how can I describe this now that I no longer have to wait in those same lines? I can't. In the book I write about the destructive psychological and physical effect that queuing has on people, I detail the horrible encounters and sights. At the moment I'm not furious and resentful in the same way. But back then I wrote exactly as I was lining up – I wrote exactly what I was feeling. It would be really difficult to write about that experience now. I can write about it... it would just turn out differently. But writing back then and from there? In the book you really get a sense of what it is like being in the prison. That's what emerges when you write from the inside. (Behrouz Boochani, personal correspondence)

I became friends with Boochani and began working with him from the beginning of 2016 and I soon became acutely aware of many features related to his physical environment, intellectual perspectives, cultural background and literary methods. This intensified once I began translating *No Friend but the Mountains*. Positionality and context determine what one knows and how one knows it, and Boochani's circumstances are so remarkably distinct and extraordinarily horrific that radically new sets of concepts, methods and criteria are required for interpretation. Since knowing is intertwined with cultural values and social positioning, I realized throughout the translation process that any attempts to understand Boochani's philosophical views will always remain limited when applying available theories of knowledge. Also, reinscribing certain stereotypes and tropes about refugees is unavoidable if the specific literary, philosophical and political features pertaining to Boochani's identity and vision are not factored into interpretations of his creative work.

Gaile Pohlhaus (2012) uses the term *wilful hermeneutical ignorance* to describe situations where people from the dominant socio-cultural group continue to oppress marginalized peoples as they engage in collective acts of epistemic resistance.³ Epistemic domination occurs when privileged knowers misunderstand and misinterpret those who resist epistemic oppression and, in addition, do not take appropriate measures to establish equity in their interactions and transform society overall.⁴ In order to create and apply remedies to epistemic injustice, one must recognize the nature of socio-political hierarchies and oppressive knowledge systems, and identify the epistemic agents positioned throughout. Rather than posit a non-social epistemic agent – the generic and self-sufficient knower characteristic of classical epistemology – Pohlhaus explains that we must recognize the *situatedness* and *interdependent* aspects of knowers; that is, the significance of social positioning and the collective nature of their inquiry into the world (Pohlhaus 2012: 717–723).

Boochani's cultural background, education, intellectual and literary influences define the style, form and techniques employed in the book. In addition, the rhetorical appeals and emotional and psychological themes are derived from the frustration and fury of 5 years of incarceration, 5 years of systematic torture and degradation. In our conversations during the process, Boochani shared his concerns regarding the book's potential to

expose the details and extent of the torture planned and orchestrated within Manus Prison, and the capacity of readers to grasp the depths of what he is trying to reveal.

Do you think Australians will get it, do you think those who read this book will hear the message?

Of course, it's a brilliant piece of literature, especially the way you fuse genres, the tropes you introduce, the multiple literary techniques you apply, the spaces you create...

OK, but regardless of its literary qualities... what about torture? Does it describe the torture? What do you understand about torture when you read it?

No Friend but the Mountains is an account not only of what Boochani has come to know as a result of these ongoing 5 years, but also an expression of *how* he knows. That is, the book conveys a particular way of knowing, a critical standpoint (Pohlhaus 2012: 720, 730–31; Harding 1991), exclusively linked to his time locked-up in Manus Prison and his endurance experienced together with the community of refugees.

Dismantling Damaging Tropes

The exclusionary and violent ideologies constructed and perpetuated by nation-state border regimes are racialized and militarized in ways that impact our epistemic resources and how we apply and modify them. In addition to Nauru and the other immigration detention centres, Manus Prison has become such an integral part of Australian political discourse and global attention that it is inseparable from contemporary forms of racial thinking in and about Australia. It is also intertwined with other major discussions: the possibilities of communication technology, complicity, censorship, media images and responsible reporting, the economy and environmental policies. Any theorizing of borders and migration in Australian universities now requires a deep consideration of the phenomenon of Manus Prison. Therefore, our experience of the border in Australia, and citizenship in general, has become imbedded within systems of connected practices, concepts and theoretical approaches pertaining to the island prison. *No Friend but the Mountains* speaks back to all views on the political spectrum: for readers in Australia and abroad, the book allows for a distinct way of knowing and feeling, and it conveys critical positions unique to the narratives Boochani creates.

There exist a number of tropes regarding displaced and exiled peoples that Boochani challenges with the very act of cultural production and the individual stories he constructs. This kind of critical commentary is made possible by the power of his unique form of literature. It is worth reintroducing the tropes I list in the book's supplementary essay in order to develop frameworks and interpretative tools that resist similar kinds of essentialism:

- Caged person – escape to the West
- Desperate supplicant
- Struggling overcomer – the battler
- Tragic and miserable victim
- Broken human being
- Mystic sage – quirky and mysterious, a trickster

The damaging effects of standard, easy tropes restrict efforts to imagine criteria that amplify resistance and work to empower the oppressed. Interpretation needs to be a transnational, intersectional and anti-colonial political project led by the subjugated identity and plight of the author (Dhamoon 2015; Denzin and Lincoln 2014). There is an element of responsibility suggested here: learning about the epistemic resources of subjugated knowers requires an engaged political commitment to their lived situation (Pohlhaus 2012: 721). Support and empowerment in the form of transformed epistemic resources involves respect for expressions of defiance and engaging with the epistemologies that drive the activism of oppressed epistemic agents.

The following passage from *No Friend but the Mountains* foregrounds resistance and empowerment and centres issues related to colonialism and the defence of homeland. The relationship between affect, knowledge and place function within the narrative to construct a uniquely situated view of the Kurdish experience during the war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988). The memory of war acts as a culturally and politically specific trope that works to convey something distinct about the oppressive conditions and the subjugated position of the knower; it also amplifies many of the features I introduce as interpretative reference points in the following section on a situated schema for reading. Boochani's flashback (analepsis) dream vision occurs in the darkness of night while lying atop one of the containers in Manus Prison, looking for the source of moaning sounds. The scene occurs just moments prior to witnessing a brutal beating of a refugee by guards:

Animosities had reached climax and teeth were gnashing from extreme hate. Old wounds were opened and blades of battle tapped into the cesspool of history, the history of hate, and disseminated its loathing, spread across what once were fields of goodwill; our vivid, green and bounteous homeland. A putrid smell came over the whole place. Enemy also didn't recognise enemy. On one side, corps with steely determination whose objective was to fight in the name of religion. On the other side, corps who also fought in the name of religion. On one side, Iraqi Ba'athists would empty their rounds. On the other side, Iranians with religious devotion would open fire. In the middle were our homes – our homes left desolate. Two grand war elephants – administering nothing but a lot of hurt.

The Peshmerga also battled from within the mountains. Their slogan represented defence of homeland and dignity. It was a war for no end, like all the other wars of history. A war with roots in earlier wars. And those wars had roots in other wars. A chain of wars born out of the nether regions of history. And so it was a seed of resentment that blossomed after centuries with the colour of blood once again.

It was these very mountains that witnessed the spectacle; it was these ancient chestnuts that lamented.

I was born in the cauldron of this war. (Boochani 2017a, 103)

A Situated Schema For Reading

For most of us, our epistemic resources and affective encounters are far-removed from the horrific, ever-changing and twisted experience of imprisonment on Manus Island. Trying to find conceptual tools, literary frames and examples, points of reference and the appropriate constellation of symbols for interpretation is hindered or blocked if interaction with the author or informed consultation and guidance is unavailable. Pohlhaus' explanation regarding the limits of our evaluation of the world in a stratified society

provides perspective here: 'The right standards for knowing the world well will be determined by what is salient in the experienced world itself, and what is salient in the experienced world itself will depend upon *situatedness*: what do I/we need to know (or care to know) and why?' (Pohlhaus 2012: 718, emphasis in original). To arrive at *what we need to know and why* will require an intellectual rupture and aesthetic shift – a move toward altering instituted social imaginaries (Dotson 2014: 119). Such ruptures and shifts are particularly necessary regarding our shared meanings and concepts pertaining to forced migration, border politics, displacement and exile. This is possible by first engaging with features that constitute the identity and situation of the author and the culturally specific forms and symbols that work to build narratives (Coupe 2006).

In the supplementary essay to *No Friend but the Mountains*, I list a set of themes that helped formulate a multifaceted and nuanced understanding of Boochani's various narrative techniques. These themes enable a richer encounter with his feelings, thoughts and activism, and my conceptualization of them was developed during the translation process. They are not exhaustive nor are they meant to function as criteria. I include the following features here – and subsequent comments – as a schema to foster a closer and more dynamic literary encounter with the text and form more emancipatory and culturally fluid, rather than normative, criteria necessary for intimate and ethically transformative engagement:

- Indigenous Kurdish presence
- Evocation
- Self-determination
- Custodianship
- Decolonization and liberation
- Intersectional and transnational rhetoric
- Horrific surrealism
- New knowledges

The intricacies of these themes are subject for another more focused study. For the purposes of this article, it is important to indicate Boochani's complex and multidimensional connection to Kurdish language, heritage and an Indigenous Kurdish knowledge system – elements that contribute both to structuring the book and characterizing its content. He has shared with me issues pertaining to his Indigenous Kurdish identity and his thoughts on aspects of modern Western culture:

Consider my indigeneity and my connection to the land. My voice in this book is not limited to my Indigenous identity. My views are also deeply influenced by modern Western thought and culture. I am both a proud Indigenous Kurdish man and an intensely modern individual. I see the power of these influences projected through my love of music – I generally only listen to two forms. I listen to Western classical music, I listen to Beethoven, I enjoy Vivaldi. But I also listen to *Houreh*. This could be one of the oldest forms of song still performed today, the Kurds have preserved it from ancient times. Its history goes back so far that not many people today are really able to engage with *Houreh*, there are very few people in Kurdistan who listen to it now. So I listen to one of the most significant forms of Indigenous music that is quickly losing its place in Kurdish society, and I also have a taste for Western music, mostly from the modern period. You can see these kinds of elements featured in my book. My encounters with people and understanding of the human condition are felt and theorised using modern Western approaches and Indigenous

knowledge. I am constantly grappling with these different aspects of who I am. (Behrouz Boochani, personal correspondence)

Attention to the above list of features also helps to foreground the visceral feelings and psychological trauma that result from systematic torture and exile. Decoloniality is a salient factor throughout the book's political and philosophical dimensions, especially the nuanced and emotive connections to land; the attention Boochani gives to ecological destruction; and the complex social and political ways labour exploitation is depicted in relation to Manusians (Boochani 2017a; Boochani 2017d).

The Standpoint from Manus Prison: A Thought Experiment

In his analysis of segregation and the epistemic standpoint of the black community described in W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Charles Mills explains the contempt Du Bois has for the white cognitive world that excludes him. Entering this world would mean living in a permanent state of 'double-consciousness'; that is, seeing himself through the cognitive lens of white supremacy, seeing himself as a problem, the subject of contempt and pity (Mills 2017: 107).⁵ For Du Bois and Mills, black communities in America have a *meta-perspective*. They have the potential for 'second-sight' or to see through the misconceptions, manipulations and machinations of white communities in America and acquire an epistemically privileged position. In this situation, it is the dominant culture that is disadvantaged and blind to the functions of racism and to the structures and operations of a socio-political world divided on racial grounds. Mills argues that there is no possibility for reconciliation of epistemologies here: total resistance is the only approach when up against white supremacy (Mills 2017: 106–107; see also Medina 2012).

Mills also discusses Du Bois' modification of Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Du Bois uses the metaphor of the veil). Du Bois situates those kept in the darkness, black Americans, as people with access to the social truth, and white Americans as ignorant even though they dwell in the light (Mills 2017: 108). In the supplementary essay accompanying *No Friend but the Mountains*, I begin with a short philosophical narrative inspired by Mills' contextualization of Du Bois' account within the epistemic injustice discourse. I want to end this essay by repeating the thought experiment, a narrative that helps illuminate the uniquely situated and interdependent philosophical thrust of Behrouz's book:

There is an island isolated in a silent ocean where people are held prisoner. The people cannot experience the world beyond the island. They cannot see the immediate society outside the prison and they certainly do not learn about what takes place in other parts of the world. They only see each other and hear the stories they tell one another. This is their reality; they are frustrated by their isolation and incarceration, but they have also been taught to accept their predicament.

News somehow enters the prison about another island where the mind is free to know and create. The prisoners are given a sense of what life is like on the other island but they do not have the capacity or experience to understand fully. The people on the other island have special insight: they see things that the prisoners cannot, they create things that the prisoners cannot, and they certainly know things that the prisoners cannot. Some of the prisoners resent the people on the other island. Some simply do not understand the people there or try to undermine them. Some are

indifferent to the other society. Some prisoners feel pity for them because they are confident that their own situation is changing for the better and will eventually provide greater freedoms.

The two islands are polar opposites. One island kills vision, creativity and knowledge – it imprisons thought. The other island fosters vision, creativity and knowledge – it is a land where the mind is free.

The first island is the settler-colonial state called Australia, and the prisoners are the settlers.

The second island contains Manus Prison, and knowledge resides there with the incarcerated refugees.

(Tofighian, forthcoming 2018b)

Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* (Picador) is due for release on 31 July 2018. Boochani's feature-length film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017), co-directed with Arash Kamali Sarvestani, is available to watch on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/chauka>

Notes

1. This passage is from a chapter that was published separately in *Island* magazine a year prior to the book's release: Boochani, B. (2017a) 'Chanting of Crickets, Ceremonies of Cruelty. A Mythic Topography of Manus Prison'. trans. Tofighian, O. *Island* 150: 96–115.
2. Examples of personal correspondence in this article took place either through Whatsapp voice messaging or during my two visits to Manus Island in 2017 and 2018. These are my own translations from Farsi to English.
3. Pohlhaus classifies wilful hermeneutical ignorance under what Charles Mills calls *epistemology of ignorance* (1997).
4. Kristie Dotson refers to this phenomenon as *contributory injustice* (2012).
5. Samia Mehrez analyzes the relationship between the famous French writer and scholar Azouz Begag and Ahmed Beneddif. Both are from the *beur* generation; they were born in France to Algerian parents who immigrated for work. While Begag is a French citizen, Beneddif never acquired citizenship due to his father's insistence to keep his Algerian nationality. Beneddif's life, in stark contrast to the successful writer and academic, has been impacted by disadvantage and intense discrimination, crime, imprisonment and multiple instances of deportation. The two develop a problematic relationship based on writing and publishing Beheddif's story; one that Begag describes as originally based on pity for the *beur* with Algerian nationality, pity for the *clandestine* who had experienced a difficult and tortuous past (Mehrez 2002).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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