

## **Feats of Survival: Refugee Writing and the Ethics of Representation**

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Refugees and their desperate circumstances are often seen as the zeitgeist of our time, haunting the western ethical value system and requiring new bureaucratic procedures of access and adjudication.<sup>1</sup> Pouring into Europe from Africa across the Black Mediterranean and fleeing from Syria and other parts of the Middle East, refugees represent the most marginalised of all diaspora populations, subject to exclusion and discrimination as stateless subjects. Hostile or reactionary responses have dominated the political landscape with detention camps, new borders or the consolidation of existing ones and the assigning of allocations and quotas in ‘Fortress Europe’.<sup>2</sup> As migratory influxes increase, nation states have struggled to meet the challenge that the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ poses to processes for adjudicating entry and citizenship, with a progressive hardening into an artificial binary of those asylum seekers deemed worthy of refugee status and those not.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the heightened media exposure and political debate that either sensationalises or trivialises stateless people, there has been a plethora of refugee stories all contributing to a ‘crisis of representation’, as Agnes Woolley notes of asylum narratives published in Britain:

oscillating between invisibility and overexposure in the public sphere, forced migrants have an ambivalent relationship to the aesthetic forms that seek to represent them, one which touches on questions of communicability, visibility and ethics.<sup>4</sup>

Misrepresentation and distortion in accounts by, of and about refugees have come to dominate public perceptions, usually reflecting the extremities under which these narratives

are produced. The refugees' own accounts of their journeys presented for adjudication in cases for asylum are given within narrowly prescriptive legal conditions and cannot hope to do justice to the personal elements of their experiences, which remain buried and invisible;<sup>5</sup> while some accounts of refugee traumas by outsiders, western readers or sympathisers that emphasise their suffering and tragic loss, tend to stereotype or scapegoat refugees as agentless victims, or demonise them as criminals or parasites, vermin or insects contaminating the pure body of the nation state. The crude simplifications and sensationalising that mark mass media reports also appear on right-wing websites or in documentary films and scripts where ways of nuancing the relationship between author, subject and viewer /reader are limited. When refugees are suddenly in full public view, as with the images of the drowned Kurdish three-year-old boy Alan Kurdi in 2015, an outpouring of public sentiment occurs, but all too many others go unnoticed. The politics of representation raises questions such as who has the right to tell these stories, and whose voices do we hear? How are audience expectations of authenticity and truth being manipulated? How can politically engaged readers make a difference to conditions of mass displacement that create extreme precarity and uncertainty?

This chapter examines three texts that may loosely be categorised as forms of refugee writing recently identified by Chandani Lokuge as that of non-citizens, that is, those who fail to gain asylum in host nations and so belong to no country.<sup>6</sup> All texts reveal the extreme vulnerability and precarity of asylum seekers who lack any access to legal advice, medical, information and translation services, media support or citizen advocacy. Referring to a short novel, an anthology of tales that are retellings of refugee stories and a political memoir, I focus on the ethics of reading and reception of texts that use affective and critical discourses to raise awareness, of the systemic inequalities underlining their plight. As forms of testimonial writing -- often horrific stories of endurance and survival -- these texts can be read

as interventions into contemporary debates, and this chapter analyses the communities of readers and audiences, both within the text and outside it, who respond to and engage with the refugee content. Actors include readers or recipients of stories or fragments told by other refugees in the text; other collaborators with refugees or asylum seekers are activist citizens involved in the textual production from a mix of political and humanitarian motives. Both imagined audiences in the world of the text and socially committed readers outside provide responses ranging from empathy to critique, acting as touchstones for real-life readers. The response of collectivities such as activist refugee support groups can be read in relation to new understandings of citizenship as a participatory politics, based on “human rights and the duties of personhood” instead of the rights and duties of the nation state.<sup>7</sup> Inclusivity is embraced by such groups as the norm, and citizenship recast as a series of practices linked across translocal spaces and national borders.<sup>8</sup> Motivated by the wish for social justice and the claim to rights, citizen activists and pressure groups aim to overturn negative responses to refugees held by governments and circulated by the mass media, to challenge official immigration and detention policies by invoking Human Rights, and international humanitarian organisations like the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and PEN. In these three texts the heightened consciousness of survivor refugees and collaborations between citizens and refugees produce a humanist response to tragic loss and a powerful critique of exclusions of the *sans papiers*, the non-citizen, from national structures of belonging.

Informing this study are Judith Butler’s theories of precarious lives and frames of perception. Butler argues that “In the politics of immigration some lives are perceived as lives while others [...] fail to assume perceptual form as such”.<sup>9</sup> She asks whether displaced, precarious lives are disposable, and inauthentic, and whether the lives of disenfranchised subjects matter as “grievable, worthy of protection as belonging to subjects with rights that

ought to be honoured”.<sup>10</sup> Butler’s political agenda in responding to death and loss is marked by co-vulnerability and co-responsibility and defines a new humanism based on grief, relationality and bodily forms of susceptibility.<sup>11</sup> Butler widens the debate about survival by theorizing precarious lives in relation to the question of political representation, in an ethical discussion of choices about life, death and survival. She has reservations about the emphasis on empathy and compassion in personal responses and many media outlets, because it forecloses more informed debate. In *Frames of War* she writes “we are against interpretation when we read the moral horror in tales of violence”<sup>12</sup> and “affective response seems to be primary and in no need of explanations, and is prior to the work of understanding and interpretation”.<sup>13</sup> This caveat (seemingly undermining her own thesis) is shared by others, who see the affective response as sheltering western viewers and readers from the intransigent facts of systemic inequality, injustice and persecution. Carolyn Pedwell, for example, writes that although the empathetic dimension seems to frame a solution by being linked to aims of building cross-cultural and transnational justice, it can also close down discussion, turning the encounter with trauma back onto readers’ own subject positions rather than trying to establish refugees as subjects with agency.<sup>14</sup> In the divisive climate resulting from the precarity of provoked refugees, images that might arouse compassion are seen as encouraging public assimilation of suffering rather than striving to effect wider socio-political change. In defining “the limits of empathy” Sukhmani Khorana says, for example,

The evocation of empathy in refugee-themed narratives is sometimes accompanied by a depoliticisation of systemic issues. This occurs by shifting responsibility onto the feelings of the ethical citizen rather than the imperative international obligations and/or power imbalance in regional relations.<sup>15</sup>

Yet debates over the relative merits of empathy and political activism cannot ignore the affective dimension that can catalyse readers and citizens to psychological, emotional or political forms of engagement and so contribute indirectly to current debates on national policies. In examining how reader expectation and understanding of survival is managed through different types of representation, it is worth considering how opinion in the discourse on refugees and non-citizens, polarises around the question of national borders. On the one hand Homi Bhabha advocates the need for belonging as crucial to understanding citizenship:

We need to conceive citizenship in a more open, more liberal, more diverse, more empathetic way [...] to change the very value-based time scale to create and think of the refugee, in that short moment, as the one who does not belong and who maybe provides the representative time frame for re-thinking this problem. The refugee thus becomes the model and the basis on which we should think about belonging.<sup>16</sup>

On the other, valuing survival at the expense of citizenship lends moral respectability to exclusionary agendas such as the deterrence policy of the Australian border force for processing illegal maritime arrivals, Operation Sovereign Borders, which claims a humanitarian policy of saving lives at sea while introducing a tow-back policy to Indonesia of boats en route to Australia, ostensibly to combat people smugglers, but in reality to prevent refugees reaching sovereign territory. The narratives of refugees with the mediating voices of citizen groups that contest these deterrence and detention practices can be read as interventions in these debates, conscious of the written word's power to shape opinion and hence indirectly influence government policy on illegal immigration.

**The poetics of testimony: Abu Bakr Khaal, *African Titanics***

Written in Arabic by Abu Bakr Khaal, an Eritrean migrant who fled to Tripoli in about 1990 and then after a short period in a detention camp in Tunisia moved to Denmark, this novel brings readers close to the irreducible humanity of the refugee whose life is in constant peril. A tale of the attempted exodus to the Mediterranean of an entire generation from Eritrea, Liberia, Somalia, Ghana and the Sudan, on clandestine asylum-seeking journeys -- a doomed desert trip, a fraught crossing in a “titanic” (i.e. a leaky boat), and periods in a smuggler’s cell in Tripoli awaiting transport -- the narrative acquires an affective dimension through the subjectivity of its narrator, Abdar. As witness to the death, starvation or debilitation of his fellow migrants, who call themselves “travellers”, Abdar creates a testimonial narrative that is also a “poetic homage” to them.<sup>17</sup> His account of the exodus of boat people from North and East Africa, interspersed with stories, songs and legends from their Eritrean cultural heritage and the blend of written narrative with oral testimony, appears as a blend of autobiographical fiction and lament.

In what can be read as the “inauthentic” framework of the novel’s opening, the narrator laughs at the travellers for being deluded in their rush to the west with its promise of sudden wealth, introducing this mirage with metaphors of sorcery, witchcraft and the plague, before himself succumbing to the “migration bug”. But he does so in order to test this mysterious force with his own powers of art and rhetoric that hubristically he sees as another form of magic.

Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell sweeping everything along in its wake. [...] I, and many others beside me, attributed it all to the works of a dark sorcerer, emerging from the mists of the unknown and sounding a magnificent bell [...]. It was a pandemic. A plague. [...] Dong, dong, dong pealed the bell, calling one and all to its promised paradise.<sup>18</sup>

The relative odds of survival inevitably weigh heavily on those who decide to take flight. Poverty, as Korte and Zipp point out, “is [...] a ‘collateral’ motif in much literature dealing with migration”;<sup>19</sup> and a major justification for migration along with war, civil conflict and limited social capability in the homelands of Africa. Indeed, this might explain the willingness of an entire generation to put their lives at risk in *African Titanics*, for the people are seduced by the prospect of western consumerism – the flashy car and beautiful woman. But there is no suggestion that their mobilisation can be traced to historical problems such as Eritrea’s war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 1990 or long-term mismanagement, and hence little opportunity for developing any critique that might challenge Abdar’s point of view, which implies a reading position based on empathy.

It is only when Abdar hears -- and begins recording -- stories and songs lamenting the non survival of friends and fellow countrymen relatable to their wish to draw themselves out of poverty, that his ethical purpose in writing about his journeys of migration takes shape. The narrator’s engagement with Malouk, a singer whose lyrical powers of song and music make him legendary, especially after he drowns in one of the capsized boats, compels Abdar to give greater representation to all those others who have been lost. Responding to Malouk’s reputation, the narrator determines his role is to show that ‘bare life’ is grievable, especially that of the artist, as he writes down Malouk’s songs and stories on behalf of the collective; this enables him to sing of this widespread tragedy that he has witnessed, climaxing in an “anthem to doomed youth”, a concluding poem that gestures to art as a form of liberation:

To all the pounding hearts  
In feverish boats  
I will cut

Through these paths  
With my own liberated heart  
And tell my soul  
To shout of your silenced deaths  
And fill palms of dust with morning dew  
And song<sup>20</sup>

The valuing of testimony and the act of memorialising are also built into the narrative when Abdar and Terhas, one of the women he travels with, bear witness to the voices of other travellers whose destinies are unknown, by reading out their inscriptions on the walls of the smugglers' den:

“If this letter reaches you, I beg you will not feel sad or fearful for me. Please do not shed any of your precious tears on my account”; ““Where will you take me, oh fleeting hours?” read one beautifully written message in Tigre [...] signed “Anonymous”; “How can the journey from shore to shore be so very difficult? It seems so simple on the maps,” a French hand had written [...]; “Forgive me, my dear Hamouddi,” came another message in Arabic. When I translated it to Terhas tears welled in her eyes [...]: “maybe it was her son?”<sup>21</sup>

As relics of past journeys and attempted crossings, the written fragments testify to lost lives or unknown fates of others who have gone before, and the tears of Abdar and Terhas, their affective responses, are a stalking horse for the reader. Abdar's narrative begins with the implication that the impulse to migrate is delusional and ill-judged as his fellow travellers ignore the risk of death in their desire to reach a western El Dorado. This emotive dimension



and change of mood, by contrast, acknowledge the demands of testimony in responding to whole-scale loss of life: the novel enacts recuperation of the travellers' presence, now valued as worthy of memorialising -- even though many names or voices cannot be recalled -- by recording the singer's response to this tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

### **Politics and representation: *Refugee Tales I, II and III***

The three volumes of *Refugee Tales* (2016, 2017, 2019) represent a genre of refugee writing consisting of advocacy-based story collections whose authors, editors or ghost writers mediate the voices of asylum seekers and refugees that might otherwise be inaccessible, by either retelling or reshaping their stories, drawing public attention to them, their feats of survival or injustices suffered.<sup>23</sup> This aim to recover voice and agency, which implies some appropriation of subaltern voice, as Gayatri Spivak's influential question about whether the subaltern can speak implies, can be countered with the argument, common to subaltern studies, that there is a need "to rely on the language of elite discourse" in critiquing the hierarchy between the west and its othered subalterns.<sup>24</sup> In this popular anthology format, western sympathisers aim to show solidarity with refugees and detainees, and to demand greater social justice and humanity in official treatment of them. They may be compared to other types of refugee narrative whose success depends on the commodification of precarity and strategic command of empathy: for example, the boy refugee narrative is a fashionable form of semi-fictional autobiography and its self-fashioning strategy gains visibility and public, financial support for the first-person narrator (who may have collaborated with a ghost writer), who has relocated to the west, or in his flight to search for a new life.<sup>25</sup>

*Refugee Tales I, II and III* stand out as a political intervention into national immigration policy in the UK as seen in the editors' call in the "Afterword" for an end to the contemporary law of indefinite detention. This demand unites these collections of

heterogeneous narrative accounts of detainees and asylum seekers who, in the titles that identify the writer who tells their story, are known only by their roles: for example in *Refugee Tales* I, “The Refugee’s Tale as told to Patience Agbabi”, “The Unaccompanied Minor’s Tale as told to Inua Ellams”, or “The Deportee’s Tale as told to Avaes Mohammad”. The writers, interpreters and lawyers under whose names the stories are presented represent a community of sympathetic listeners and narrators acting as witnesses or testifiers and so mediating the readers’ responses, sometimes appropriating, quoting or summarising the migrant tale, sometimes conversing or speaking in their own voice.

By contrast to *African Titanics*, where the act of memorialising those who have disappeared takes over the narrator’s initial intention to write a story to prove the superiority of his rhetorical powers, in *Refugee Tales* the ethics of representation, of the western subject’s speaking for the ‘other’, might be seen as problematic because not necessarily faithful to their own experience. Spivak’s question about who should speak is relevant to the ethical issue of a committed writer imposing their voice over that a migrant whose story is being told at the risk of seemingly denying such subjects agency. Ali Smith’s manipulation of narrative conventions in order to foreground her own feelings in visiting a detainee in “The Detainee’s Story” by identifying with his situation and so overriding his voice was criticised by one reviewer, for it suggests that “skilful writing in the service of good intentions can still, without meaning to, contribute to the voicelessness of the voiceless”.<sup>26</sup> Yet this issue is anticipated in the collaborative efforts of life writing, according to the editors, for when consulted about the problems of telling stories of personal trauma, often in an unfamiliar language, the migrants confirmed a wish for anonymity out of fear of official reprisal and so implied that their story could be shared with a teller: “it was a relief that the tale was being told though [...] they could not be the person who told it [...] they were relieved that the account was being passed on”.<sup>27</sup> Their collective voice -- that they would prefer the stories to

be told *in this way* in order to gain visibility although not being individualised – underpins their willingness to collaborate in co-producing their narratives.

Such ethical issues of representation can be seen in relation to the strategic construction of refugee texts, memoirs and anthologies in ways that elevate them above the limits of such writing due to language, social and educational factors. The welfare project underpinning *Refugee Tales* I, II and III challenges the human rights injustices perpetrated by the UK system of indefinite detention, as the acknowledgement of refugee support groups and citizens activists confirms:<sup>28</sup> The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, Kent Refugee Help and a host of volunteers, speakers, patrons, walkers and other participants, representing many local and national community circles. The political aims are also realised in the central structural principle of the anthologies: an intertextual relationship to Geoffrey Chaucer's 14<sup>th</sup>-century *The Canterbury Tales*, the nation's earliest and most famous tale-telling collection. This appears in the conceptual dimension, the structure of the text and numerous verbal echoes and parallels. The collective enterprise of tale-telling on which *Refugee Tales* I is based took place in 2015 as a walking project (of tellers and narrators) across the wealds of Kent, retracing the route taken by Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims along the North Downs Way to Canterbury. Not only does this walking trip locate the refugees and asylum seekers in "a deeply national space" from which such illegal migrants are usually excluded,<sup>29</sup> it also aligns their words and experiences with the most seminal tale-telling collection in the literary canon: Chaucer's text confers dignity by association. Furthermore, identifying the speakers responsible for each tale according to their role or vocation (e.g. "The Visitor's Tale", "The Chaplain's Tale", "The Lorry Driver's Tale") draws on the model used in Chaucer's literary text (e.g. "The Man of Law's Tale", "The Parson's Tale", "The Shipman's Tale"). The intertextual relationship with this famous precursor is most overt in editor David Herd's "Prologue", which partly rewrites Chaucer's "General Prologue" and his seminal invocation

to spring that stresses how nature quickens the spirit and inspires people to go on pilgrimages.<sup>30</sup> Herd invokes the political energies that aim to reject official stories of asylum seekers (the version they have to tell in order to make a case for asylum) in favour of personal stories that have been rendered invisible and unknown: “So priketh hem nature / Not believing the stories/ Our officials tell./ Because we know too much /About what is left unsaid”.<sup>31</sup>

Collectively the welfare group of asylum seekers, detainees and refugees and the artistic community are motivated by a shared awareness of human life as grievable, and the collaboration between individual tellers and the asylum seeker and their tale, is metonymic of the aims of the real life walking project, to establish what Butler calls the “interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment”.<sup>32</sup> The telling of stories provides a dynamic of co-responsibility as the detainees’ and asylum seekers’ situation is addressed in the appeal for a change in policy. The editors’ polemic reflects this pro-active stance in engaging with refugees and detainees to protest against the practice of indefinite detention, while the intertextual engagement with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* by including audiences with tellers elevates the text above the status of the familiar refugee narrative format. Furthermore the dialogue/commentary format enables the refugee/asylum seekers to speak with their empathetic collaborator about the personal cost of their survival, and the retellings stress the different losses: of family left in the homeland and of those who did not survive the journey, while the cost to mental health and well being -- the trauma and suffering on the journey and in the present circumstances -- is conveyed both verbally and through body language.

**Beyond pity: Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison***

*No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, a refugee memoir by Kurdish-Iranian writer Behrouz Boochani, is a powerful political critique of the Australian mandatory policy on asylum seekers that introduced offshore Regional Processing Centres for entry visas in 2001, and from 2013 decreed that those who attempted illegal entry would not be granted access to Australia but instead would be encouraged to seek deportation to their homelands. This repatriation process called *refoulement*, is expressly forbidden in the UNHCR Refugee Convention (1951, 1967); but by undertaking refugee processing in territories beyond its national borders like Manus (situated in Papua New Guinea) and Nauru islands, that have either not signed up to the Convention or with limited sovereignty are able to ignore it, Australia has managed to meet its non-refoulement obligations.<sup>33</sup> A resurgence of xenophobia and fear of illegal migrants and refugees, undoubtedly associated with the White Australia policy that prevailed until 1972, has meant that successive governments – at both ends of the political spectrum – found implementing harsh detention and deterrence policies a successful election ploy. But the hard-line policies of the Pacific Solution (2001-08) and Operation Sovereign Borders (2013-) have been hotly contested by community activist Refugee Action organisations and Human Rights groups; leaks from whistleblowers among official personnel and reports by journalists who penetrated the secrecy of the camps contributed to the closure of the Immigration Detention Centres (IDC)<sup>34</sup> -- Nauru after reports of physical and sexual abuse in 2007 and again in 2018, and Manus in October 2017, after the Papua New Guinean Supreme Court ruled that the camp was unlawful.<sup>35</sup>

A well-known writer-journalist-filmmaker who fled persecution in Iran, Behrouz Boochani was detained upon arrival on Christmas Island, and sent to Manus IDC in late 2013, just after it was decreed that no refugee could enter Australia or be granted Australian citizenship; after the camp's closure he remained in Port Moresby with other occupants who were subsequently evicted to New Zealand, USA, Cambodia, Nauru or detention centres in

Australia. *No Friend but the Mountains* is his autobiographical memoir about life in the Manus IDC he calls “the prison”; published in 2018 it immediately gained a following, has gone into at least four reprints, and is currently being adapted for a film. In February 2019 it won the prestigious Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards, the Victoria Prize for Literature and simultaneously the Victoria Prize for Non-Fiction; the book’s celebrity status has meant that Boochani, already known for his *Guardian* articles written while on Manus, has become a popular speaker at cultural venues and refugee circles, speaking from Manus by WhatsApp or Skype.<sup>36</sup> An invitation to attend a literary festival in Christchurch in November 2019 became his passport out: he overstayed his tourist visa and was granted refugee status in New Zealand in July 2020 (Moses 2020).<sup>37</sup>

*No Friend but the Mountains* both mirrors in expressive performative images and indicts in evocative prose the inhumane practices perpetrated in the IDC on Manus Island, by which the refugee community, under constant surveillance of the Australian and Papua New Guinean guards, was reduced to borderline survival—many becoming psychological spectres. Boochani’s story of his death-defying ocean voyage from Indonesia to Christmas Island resembles other refugee accounts, but his politically-angled representations of the malpractices and systematic degradation in the camp through what he labels the “Kyriarchal System” have evoked comparison with the canonical prison narratives of Oscar Wilde, Gramsci and Martin Luther King.<sup>38</sup> Kyriarchy, a term adapted from feminist theory, refers to “a web of intersecting oppressions - racism, sexism colonialism”<sup>39</sup> which on Manus defines a subjugating, punishing regime that uses “systematic torture”<sup>40</sup> and aims to set the men against each other. The political aims and resistant ideology of the memoir are explicated in the introduction by Boochani’s Iranian translator, Omid Tofighian (attached to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney), who, noting the historical links between forced migration and colonialism, identifies it as a “decolonial text” that aims to deconstruct the

neocolonial practices of Australia's zero tolerance immigration policy.<sup>41</sup> Boochani also draws on Foucault's critiques of the prison for what he and Tofighian call "Manus Prison Theory",<sup>42</sup> such as the "heterotopia of deviance", one in which the absolute finite space of internment dissolves into multiple, disparate spaces, juxtaposed so as to fragment the experience of incarceration,<sup>43</sup> and his surreal descriptions and states of mind point to Foucault's "monstrous heterotopia": that is, disordered spaces that "bring paradoxical arrangements into being in ways that seem *unreal*".<sup>44</sup>

*No Friend but the Mountains* is also a text of mental resilience and survival, as Boochani punctuates his account of prison horrors such as self-harming, violent beatings and group hysteria, with subjective explorations of alternative spaces that offer refuge, as in imaginatively distancing himself and returning in memory to his childhood in the mountains of Iran and recalling folk tales and stories from his Iranian Persian heritage. Like in *African Titanics*, passages of exclamatory, rhythmic poetry punctuate the prose made visible by italics. In Boochani's reconstruction of the prison logic of the Kyriarchal System denunciation and declamation blend with dreams of escape. Metaphorically the camp is a war zone: "*The prison is in the middle of a clenched fist/ Now loosening now tightening/ on the verge of exploding*",<sup>45</sup> but always at a distance, he realises that anger and rebellion inevitably fail and the men create "A smaller emotional jail within themselves out of hopelessness and disempowerment".<sup>46</sup> Boochani uses an anonymising naming strategy that resembles that of *Refugee Tales*: different personalities assume new roles in response to detention and are given appropriate monikers -- e.g. the Fat Man, the Prime Minister (the honourable man who asked to be repatriated), Maysam the Whore (entertainer), the Hero/Leader, the Prophet, the Cow (always first in the food queue). As the notes explain, only those who did not survive are named, as a mark of respect and to memorialise them (the Gentle Giant is Reza Barati, killed in the four-day riot of February 2014; the Smiling Youth is Hamid Khazaei, who also

died). Realistic representation is otherwise avoided in order to protect the refugees from public exposure: the disguise that renaming offers to agentless, fragmented detainees is a tactical survival technique.

Boochani's strategy of resilience in dealing with the disorientation and distress he experiences, through recurring nightmares of drowning, or as surreal or absurd states and impressions, is to distance himself and gain access to his creative powers. He seeks isolation and at night finds unoccupied spaces (on the roof of the solitary confinement hut or vaulting the fence to the beach); he revels in proximity to nature –the sights of flowers, insects, trees – and the sounds that fill the darkness, “the chanting of crickets, the whirling of moths and the voice of the cat”, and the fragrance of “flowers resembling chamomile” away from “the smell of other people”. From such moments comes a “Sense of calm and the grand feeling of a new self” due to an interaction, “internal and profound in my unconsciousness and the totality of the landscape”.<sup>47</sup> These synergies are presented in an expressive mode that draws on the linguistic and stylistic heritage of Iranian Kurdish imagery and oral culture of folktales, as like many diaspora writers, he consciously ‘others’ himself in order to reconstruct a more integrated identity. Becoming a stranger to the closely monitored, hysterical and explosive community he images himself organically in ways analogous to the chestnut trees he remembers from the village of his war-torn childhood and his dream of freedom: “like a coconut tree with roots deep in the ground and my hair taken by the wind”.<sup>48</sup>

As a narrative of resilience and survival, as well as political critique, *No Friend but the Mountains* reaches beyond empathy and pity usually invoked in refugee stories, to demand a critical response to Australia's harsh detention policies. Numerous paratexts implement its political aim to image and denounce the Pacific Solution and the Manus management system, while also testifying to the story's extraordinary transmission from social media messages into the medium of print: a Preface by Australian Booker prize-



winning novelist Richard Flanagan, a lengthy introduction comprising the voices of Boochani's Australian supporters that includes a discussion of the book's politics by Tofighian in "Translator's Tale: A Window to the Mountains", substantial explanatory footnotes and an Afterword, "Translator's Reflections". The story was smuggled out in fragments on Boochani's cell phone through text-messaging;<sup>49</sup> the Farsi was translated into English by a team including the Iranian-Australian translator, Moones Mansoubi, and Tofighian, and the text was organised and revised through conversations on WhatsApp. The introduction acknowledges all others who contributed to the editing and publication process and their role in preparing the text in ways that would guide readers: Janet Galbraith, and her Refugee Writing Group, other writers and artists, Iranian friends, Picador publishers and PEN international.

As a first hand insider account of the dehumanisation that occurs in detention camps, *No Friend but the Mountains* complements and amplifies the media reports that over the years testified to the dire psychological and physical consequences of the maltreatment of illegal, stateless subjects; such as evidence of children self-harming and killing themselves, a potent source of public anger and outrage. The first readers of Boochani's tale of incarceration—i.e., the human rights and refugee support groups, translators and activists – collaborated with him on its political message and challenge to the Australian immigration system of deterrence and detention. The violation of life that occurred in the Pacific hell holes of Manus and Nauru is pointed to; at least 13 men died in detention on Manus and Nauru islands and Flanagan in his Preface demands: "Someone must answer for these crimes".<sup>50</sup> As with *Refugee Tales* I, II and III, and the story-telling walking tours across Kent, these enactments of solidarity reflect the aims of this supportive community, in this case to determine Boochani's text's cultural importance to Australia. In a gesture of inclusiveness Flanagan acclaims Boochani's place in the national narrative as a "great Australian writer",

and demands that “our history must henceforth account for his story”.<sup>51</sup> The text’s hybridised literary and historic genealogy is stressed: Boochani constructs his “zoo of cruelty”<sup>52</sup> by blending western literary traditions and the legacies of Kurdish and Iranian cultures; modernist influences like Kafka’s *The Trial*, Camus’s *The Stranger* and Beckett’s prose works are seen in his defamiliarizing stylistic tropes of the Gothic, grotesque and the surreal: citing these allusions in the introduction helps elevate the narrative above the level of a refugee story, or of a hidden episode in Australia’s shameful history of immigration.

### **Conclusion: The impact of non-citizen refugee narratives**

The acts of solidarity by characters in the text of *African Titanics* and the collaborative efforts of western sympathisers and activists in their advocacy against the practices of indefinite detention and deterrence in the other two texts are determining features of non-citizen refugee writing. In both *Refugee Tales* and *No Friend but the Mountains* the oppositional positioning of editors, translators, writers and refugee support groups, can be inferred from paratexts which provide a rationale for the text and shape responses to it as a political document, as well as invoking empathic identification with the refugee or asylum seeker. In promoting these aims, the co-producers of the texts turn to the intersectional approach offered by writing in order to challenge the exclusionary norms of citizenship that are articulated along a single axis.<sup>53</sup> These new forms of literary citizenship advocacy can be aligned to other recent types, such as the transgressive citizenship activism identified by Kim Rygiel, in which non-citizen migrants and citizens working with them engage in confrontations with official authorities at national and territorial borders;<sup>54</sup> they may help in hardening opposition to refugee detention, and creating a demand for reconsideration of official policies. Such acts are informed by the belief that a change in the law is needed, requiring renegotiation of the division between the state and the ‘others’ at its borders which policies of indefinite detention have sharpened.

The reception of these texts confirms their wider impact on public opinion. Some reviews of *Refugee Tales* raised the issue of indefinite detention.<sup>55</sup> In October 2019 the UK Parliament agreed to the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) that detention only be used “as a last resort” and that “the maximum cumulative period for detention should be 28 days”.<sup>56</sup> These decisions may be read in relation to the demands made in *Refugee Tales* and reiterated in subsequent articles and reviews. The national importance of *No Friend but the Mountains* was remarked on by reviewers. Robert Manne notably recommended that “every Australian beginning with the Prime Minister should read Behrouz Boochani’s intense, lyrical, and psychologically perceptive prose-poetry masterpiece”;<sup>57</sup> and Boochani’s double prize confirmed Flanagan’s claim that the book represented a “profound victory” in that words can overcome the system.<sup>58</sup> Upon winning another prize, the National Biography Award in August 2019, Boochani acknowledged supporters like Flanagan, saying: “the literature community as a part of civil society of Australia are part of our resistance in front of this system”.<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler’s observation in *Frames of War*, therefore, that although literature never got anyone out of prison or reversed the course of a war it can “provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence”,<sup>60</sup> is relevant to the ways in which literary success and strategic cultural production help mobilise public resistance to injustice, and inhumane treatment, and help create a consensus that policies leading to such practices be revised or revoked.<sup>61</sup>

This determination to revalue human life by turning to the powers of song and the written word emerges in Abu Bakr Khaal’s *African Titanics* in the narrator’s ‘conversion’ to testimonial writing, after witnessing precarity of life and death during the travellers’ flight, and it appears as well in the solidarity and solicitude among the refugees as they become increasingly enfeebled. It is explicit in the voices of Boochani’s supporters in his account,

which confirm that refugee writing can be multi-generic, in that tales of individual resilience and survival can be framed with a political and reforming purpose. Likewise in *Refugee Tales*, the intertexts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as well as tale-teller relationships that represent dialogues between narrators and refugees complicate any assumption that refugee writing is just a form of self-writing, memoir or autobiography. These strategies encourage readers who might otherwise feel reduced to the marginality of the narrative's subjects to distance themselves from the traumatic dimension of the narrative and move beyond empathy to question official systems of deterrence and detention. Although personal trauma and suffering in many stories of *Refugee Tales* are manifest, and the core account of *No Friend but the Mountains* can be read as "horrific realism",<sup>62</sup> with affinities to the nightmare realism of other contemporary stories about migration and refugees such as those of the Iraqi writer Hassan Blassim,<sup>63</sup> the affective reaction they incur can also encourage some appraisal of these real-life circumstances in terms of political resistance. Depictions of acts of affective solidarity and caring in all three encourage a rebalancing of the affective with the activist's determination for social change. All of them, and especially Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*, are more than expanded versions of the testimonial genre of autobiographical writing associated with the refugee narrative: recognition of the literary scale and merit of these stories of resistance and survival argues for their emphatic political impact in the public sphere as they open up new horizons of expectation for readers.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Nail (2015) and Malley (2016).

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Giorgio Agamben sees the refugee as “the only thinkable figure for the people of our time,” insofar as it “breaks the identity between the human and the citizen, and that between nativity and nationality,” and moreover, “it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis.”<sup>1</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” *Social Engineering*, no.15 (2008): pp. 90-95.

<sup>2</sup> The UNHCR reports that by June 2019 there were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people including 26 million refugees (half of whom are under 18) and 4.2 million stateless people; see UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance”; <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

Accessed March 6, 2021

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘crisis’ refers to the threat refugees pose to border security; it is used to stop them from reaching sovereign territory and so justify their detention; see Fleay (2019, 519-520, 531).

<sup>4</sup> Woolley (2014, 13).

<sup>5</sup> Woolley (2014, 209).

<sup>6</sup> Lokuge (2021, @).

<sup>7</sup> Ní Mhurchú (2014, 170).

<sup>8</sup> Mann (2017, 3).

<sup>9</sup> Butler (2016, 24).

<sup>10</sup> Butler (2016, 41).

<sup>11</sup> Critics argue that Butler’s new humanism occludes other positions with “a veil of ignorance” or “white amnesia” (Danewid 2017, 1676, 1681); that she universalises the human subject, predicated as a “wounded and injured, but essentially innocent western subject” (Thobani 2010, 135) as interchangeable with the victimised subject who is mourned; and that her mandate for empathetic engagement and ethical responsibility marginalises the systemic nature of precarity and its roots in colonialism. In summary, Butler’s western orientation is

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critiqued for ignoring the postcolonial project of responding to historical situations of oppression, inequity and injustice as likely causes of today's migrant exodus.

<sup>12</sup> Butler (2016, 41).

<sup>13</sup> Butler (2016, 49).

<sup>14</sup> Pedwell (2014, x).

<sup>15</sup> Khorana (2018, 305).

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha (2015, @).

<sup>17</sup> See the anonymous, undated review in Nahla Ink Online Journal.

<sup>18</sup> Khaal (2014, 3).

<sup>19</sup> Korte and Zipp (2014, 3).

<sup>20</sup> Khaal (2008, 122).

<sup>21</sup> Khaal (2014, 122).

<sup>22</sup> See also Butler (2016, 25).

<sup>23</sup> See also the anthologies edited by Rosie Scott and Thomas Keneally (2013); Lucy Popescu (2016); Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes (2016).

<sup>24</sup> See Nandi (2013/14, 153-154); Spivak (1988).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the Australian memoirs by Do (2010) and Deng (2016); the latter was co-written with Ben McKelvey and proceeds go to the John Mac Foundation "to further education and justice in Australia and South Sudan".

<sup>26</sup> Braun (2016).

<sup>27</sup> Herd and Pincus (2016, 142).

<sup>28</sup> Herd and Pincus (2016, 150).

<sup>29</sup> Herd and Pincus (2016, 138).

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<sup>30</sup> The Middle English reads: “And smale foweles maken melodye,/ That slepen al the nyght with open ye /(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages), /Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (Chaucer 1988, 23).

<sup>31</sup> Herd and Pincus (2016, vi).

<sup>32</sup> Butler (2016, 19).

<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald (2019, 231).

<sup>34</sup> An Australian Border Force Act passed in July 2015 imposed a two-year imprisonment for release of unauthorised information about the IDCs; see Fleay (2016, 86).

<sup>35</sup> Refugee Status Determination on Manus Island Regional Processing Centre was determined by Papua New Guinean Government in a Regional Resettlement Arrangement whereby Australia ceded management responsibility; see Wallis and Dalsgaard (2016, 3). Complaints by Australian guards and the Papua New Guinean workers that they could no longer tolerate working in the camp were also influential (Fitzgerald 2019, 238).

<sup>36</sup> See Wahlquist (2019). The Victoria Premiere’s Literary Awards waived the criterion that applicants be Australian citizens.

<sup>37</sup> In 2021 Boochani is Ursula Bethell Writer in Residence at the University of Canterbury; <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/news/2020/uc-writers-in-residence-2021-vana-manasiadis-and-behrouz-boochani.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Boochani (2018, 124 (fn 6)).

<sup>39</sup> Elliott (2019).

<sup>40</sup> Boochani (2018, xxviii, 362).

<sup>41</sup> Boochani (2018, xxv).

<sup>42</sup> Boochani (2018, xv).

<sup>43</sup> Foucault (1967, 3).

<sup>44</sup> McWatters (2013, 204, emphasis in original).

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<sup>45</sup> Boochani (2018, 175)

<sup>46</sup> The crisis came as a four day riot in February 2014, in which one man was killed, after the Manus IDC refugees learnt that there was no hope of entry into Australia, when the Australian Immigration Minister warned: ““either you go back to your countries or you will remain on Manus Island forever”” Boochani (2018, 125, 313).

<sup>47</sup> Boochani (2018, 294-295, 255, 257).

<sup>48</sup> Boochani (2018, 263). Boochani was brought up during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88. His reflections on the Kurds’ long-term struggle against oppression focus on the chestnut oak forest that surrounds his village, a symbol of salvation and sacrifice. Kurdish civilians caught between the opposing forces of Iraqi Ba’athists (Arab nationalists), Iranian zealots and Peshmerga (Kurdish militia) found asylum in a chestnut grove; with the deaths of many “chestnuts became the solace for buried dreams”; Boochani (2018, 259).

<sup>49</sup> Boochani (2018, xxxiii).

<sup>50</sup> Boochani (2018, ix).

<sup>51</sup> Boochani (2018, ix).

<sup>52</sup> Boochani (2018, vii).

<sup>53</sup> Fleras (2017, 25).

<sup>54</sup> An activism that engages with the “politics of death”: Rygiel (2014, 62).

<sup>55</sup> Muir (2017), Herd (2016). This period was recommended by a cross-party parliamentary enquiry in 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Parliament. JCHR. Government Response to the Committee’s Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19 (2019, 10, 14).

<sup>57</sup> Manne (2018).

<sup>58</sup> Boochani (2018, ix).

<sup>59</sup> “Behrouz Boochani wins National Biography Award” (19 August 2019).



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<sup>60</sup> Butler (2016, 9–11).

<sup>61</sup> Ian Rintoul from The Refugee Action Coalition, Sydney, reported in early March 2021 that refugees held on Manus and Nauru are currently being released in an ad hoc manner from Detention Centres and hotels into Australian society, indicating a tacit recognition that detention is no longer tenable. See

<http://www.refugeeaction.org.au/?p=15834>; <http://www.refugeeaction.org.au/?p=15848>;  
<http://www.refugeeaction.org.au/?p=15850>

<sup>62</sup> Boochani (2018, xxix).

<sup>63</sup> See Sakr (2018).

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