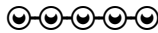


CHAPTER 14

Memoir and a Sinking Ship

Reconstituting Humanity through Refugee Narratives

Megan Butler



What is it about Behrouz Boochani's memoir *No Friend but the Mountains* that makes it different from other accounts of refugee experiences? This is the question I asked myself before I started reading because it had been recommended so emphatically by colleagues who share my interest in memoirs of refugee experiences. In the book, Boochani describes his flight from Iran in 2013, his attempts to reach Australia by boat, and the six long years he spent in an offshore detention facility trying to claim asylum. The journey he described was familiar to me; harrowing sea crossings, intermittent humanitarian intervention, political machinations, and extended periods of waiting in dismal conditions form the skeleton of many refugee accounts, both fiction and nonfiction, from the last two decades. But I had an unsettled feeling after I finished reading. As with most memoirs, *No Friend but the Mountains* transcribes a life lived, or a part of a life lived, from the author's personal experience, so I had opened this book with the expectation that Boochani was the subject. Yet, I closed the book wondering who the subject of this book really was and what type of witnessing was being represented. Was it even a memoir at all?

While Boochani was existing in the barest conditions in a prison-like refugee camp on Manus Island, an island off the coast of Papua New Guinea, he used Facebook and WhatsApp messaging on a series of hidden phones to tap out thousands of texts. With the help of refugee advocates and translators, the texts were forwarded to Omid Tofighian, an Iranian-Australian translator in Sydney. Boochani texted in both prose and poetry when he could. Together, they decided that Tofighian would edit the texts into a narrative for publica-

tion, a process that would be convoluted at best while Boochani was held in a place where communication could be suspended by Australian authorities at any time and a phone was a rare commodity. *No Friend but the Mountains* was the outcome, and just seven months after its publication in 2018, it won both the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Victorian Premier's Prize for Non-Fiction, Australia's highest awards for an Australian writer. At the 2019 award ceremony in Melbourne—that Boochani could not attend because he could not leave Manus Island after six years of detention—the nominating committee called him a great Australian writer, although he had never been in the country and was barred from entry.

Receiving the awards was extraordinary, a dream come true for a writer's first book. The dream, however, was marred by Boochani's persistent detention and the contradictions riddling his predicament. He was receiving honorary citizenship from the same country refusing him entry. This odd and frustrating situation brought me back to my question of representation. Why this unusual move by Australia's literary community? Was it an act of resistance or atonement, or a mix of both? Boochani described being co-opted as an Australian writer and winning the awards as "a paradoxical feeling."¹ He was considered an honorary citizen by the awards committee and denied legal citizenship at the same time, and even though the consideration was symbolic, the denial definitely was not. His mixed feelings were understandable: Which Australians were offering political belonging and saw him—a Kurdish-Iranian journalist wanting to write free from persecution—as a like-minded member of their community? And which Australians were denying citizenship to him or anyone attempting to enter their country except by narrow legal channels? And what would it mean to belong to a place that worked so ferociously to keep you out?

Tofighian, Boochani's translator and editor, states that Boochani's intention was always "to hold a mirror up to the [Australian] system, dismantle it, and produce a historical record to honour those who [had] been killed and everyone who is still suffering."² This intent made readers witness to multiple actors and a brutal system, and muddled the question of representation that is usually so clear in memoir. Yes, aspects of memoir are here, since the genre can be narrowly defined as narrative of the author's personal memories, but *No Friend but the Mountains* is also the mirror the author intended because it is a narrative of the lived experience of national migration policies. Why is the distinction important? In four hundred pages, Boochani seems to say, come along, let me show you what it means to be adrift, to escape one punitive, corrupt regime (Iran) only to wind up in the "care" of another seeking to "protect" its sovereignty and citizenry (Australia). For those reading more broadly, he speaks to the citizens of countries whose systems of border management and refugee care compound suffering by shifting responsibility for both to countries in the global South. His story forces readers—me included—to reckon with ideas of

citizenship and global responsibility and to understand what it means to seek refuge. In a common imagination of the refugee experience, the process is linear: it begins with hardship or war and ends with a happy relocation elsewhere. Boochani's experience disrupts this. His journey was meandering and indeterminate, and the refuge he received was often just as violent, dehumanizing, and degrading as the conditions he fled.

Imagining the Refugee

Until *No Friend But the Mountains* was published, most Australians knew little of the detention centers. Post-World War II immigration policies were liberal in Australia, and the country had a relatively open door until the early 1990s, when waves of Asian immigrants prompted the creation of the One Nation Party, a right-wing populist movement opposed to multiculturalism and Indigenous rights. The complaints of that fringe party seeped into the mainstream, and offshore detention centers were reopened during the 2010s as part of Australia's "Pacific Solution," a program to manage growing immigration numbers. Journalists were repeatedly denied access to the centers, and a grim law was passed in 2014 allowing convictions of up to two years in prison for "any doctors or social workers who bore public witness to children beaten or sexually abused [or] to acts of rape or cruelty."³ Medical workers allowed into the prisons were barred from telling of the cruelty of the Australian jailers, the rank living conditions, the two young prisoners who set themselves on fire, or the young girl who sewed her lips together to protest her detention. In the book's introduction, Australian novelist Richard Flanagan tried to describe what was so disturbing about Boochani's experience. Australians, he wrote, "pride [themselves] on decency, kindness, generosity, and a fair go. None of these qualities were evident in Boochani's account of hunger, squalor, beatings, suicide and murder."⁴

No Friend but the Mountains reflected back to Australians a national reality at odds with individual understandings, or "imaginaries," that is, the ideas individuals have about their society that combine how things usually go with how they think things should go.⁵ The Australian divide over Boochani, revealed by the literary community's decision to claim him as a member in opposition to the government's decision to brand him an unwelcome refugee, showed how far apart these imaginaries can be. *No Friend but the Mountains* showed a side of Australia that challenged the decency, kindness, and generosity Flanagan wrote about. It also deflated imaginaries about humanitarianism and the types of people seeking refuge, two aspects of crises often marshaled when political imaginaries impact national policy. Proffered as a solution for what was described as "invading hordes,"⁶ the detention camp became a political and hu-

manitarian problem in both Australia and Papua New Guinea in part because Boochani's book offered a counternarrative that estranged readers from their imaginaries.

All this was done not as a work of grand theory long considered but as one man's account cobbled together from texts that often leave traditional prose for a particular type of poetry called a Persian *ghazal*. Boochani wrote with *ghazals* to communicate in a different register, veering from the ordinary to understand the extraordinary in a way that defied simple assumptions about the place of refugees within the national and international community. In this mode, his writing radiates a connection between form and meaning and offers a powerful indictment of how systems operate at the level of the individual, where people and imaginaries meet. The *ghazals* are woven throughout to make some sense of his parallel traumas—they appear when his experience is more than he can bear or when he has moments of solitude that allow for expansive thinking. Originally an ancient Arabic expression of loss and the pain of separation from place or love, the *ghazal* was embraced by Persian poets nearly a thousand years ago and adapted to encompass love, loss, melancholy, and existential questions. The Persian form of layered couplets has been absorbed by poets all over the world and adapted through translations. Today, critics describe the *ghazal* as akin to looking in a broken mirror, with “each couplet like one of the shards of glass,” reflecting a different perspective, and disrupting unities of voice and narrative.⁷ From this point of view, the *ghazal* is a symbolic addition to *No Friend but the Mountains*, perhaps the final state of the mirror Boochani intended with the book, and a clue for me about why I found the narrative disturbing. All those shards prompt something more than bearing witness to a story well told, they also reflect readers into the narrative as part of the story and make the question of representation thick with additional questions.

Confronting the Political Imaginary

*I can't believe what is happening to me /
All that hardship /
All that wandering from place to place /
All that starvation I had to endure /
All of it . . . /
So that I could arrive on Australian soil /
I cannot believe I am now being exiled to Manus /
A tiny island out in the middle of the ocean.*⁸

Boochani wrote this *ghazal* after he and the other migrants he traveled with were rescued from the sea, their boat broken to pieces by the waves. An Indonesian fishing boat pulled them out of the water, then a British cargo ship

sheltered them until an Australian warship took them onboard. They thought their journey was over, that safe in the custody of the Australian navy they could make their claims for asylum. From the top deck of the ship in a sentence that reads like a sigh of relief, Boochani wrote, “Whatever has passed, we have reached Australia. Life has shed its love on us.”⁹ But that love was short-lived when they were taken not to Australia but to Christmas Island, a speck of land in the Indian Ocean seven hours by air to the closest spot on the Australian mainland. There they were informed that they would be held indefinitely on Manus Island, a small island off the northern coast of Papua New Guinea that had been used as an offshore detention center since 2001. The migrants did not know they had arrived at a moment of intense political backlash against migrants arriving by sea to Australia, but they did know that if they were not on Australian soil, they could not make a claim for asylum; this was a crushing blow, only partially revealed by the anguish in Boochani’s *ghazal* above.

At that same time in 2013, a conservative Coalition party aiming to take control of the Australian government introduced a “Stop the Boats” campaign as part of their plan called Operation Sovereign Borders. For many years, illegal entry to Australia by boat was negligible, and the term used was “irregular Maritime arrivals.” In 2008, 161 people were intercepted; by 2013, that number had risen to 13,108, and the description shifted to “*illegal* Maritime arrivals.”¹⁰ If elected, the Coalition promised a zero-tolerance approach to illegal entry by boat. Election rhetoric raised the issue to crisis proportions, a situation worthy of exerting the nation’s sovereignty, or the state’s right to do whatever it deemed necessary to protect and maintain its borders. When the Coalition was elected, they put Operation Sovereign Borders into effect with forced offshore processing, stricter barriers to citizenship, and harsher penalties for illegal entry. In a message to smugglers and asylum seekers, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd warned, “If you are going to put someone onto a boat to come to Australia, we, the Australian government, are not going to allow you to settle in Australia. Everything else is secondary to that. That is the absolute core message.”¹¹ Asylum seekers were characterized as dangerous invaders and drains on state resources, and advertisements like the one below, authorized and circulated by the government, used harsh language to keep them away (see figure 14.1).

The disbelief in Boochani’s *ghazal* when he wrote, “I can’t believe this is happening to me . . . I cannot believe I am now being exiled to Manus,” is visceral, as if an opportunity was all but plucked from his hands. Even though I was reading a book filled with words he had typed into a cell phone, I imagined them on a tear-soaked page. I thought of what these lines—neatly ordered and uniformly punctuated—said without saying, and in that empty space I read rage and indignation made all the more acute because he was powerless and impotent, a man with no control over his future and no future to control. Over the course of his six years in detention, the Australian government offered

Australian Government

NO WAY

YOU WILL NOT MAKE AUSTRALIA HOME

The Australian Government has introduced the toughest border protection measures ever.

- If you get on a boat without a visa, you will not end up in Australia.
- Any vessel seeking to illegally enter Australia will be intercepted and safely removed beyond Australian waters.
- The rules apply to everyone: families, children, unaccompanied children, educated and skilled.
- No matter who you are or where you are from, you will not make Australia home.

THINK AGAIN BEFORE YOU WASTE YOUR MONEY. PEOPLE SMUGGLERS ARE LYING.

www.australia.gov.au/novisa
Authorised by the Australian Government, Capital Hill, Canberra

Figure 14.1. • An advertisement to “Stop the Boats,” part of the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service’s 2013 Operation Sovereign Borders campaign. Wikipedia Commons, public domain (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License).

Boochani two choices: return to Iran, or remain detained on Manus. Returning Boochani to Iran—a process called “refoulement,” in which refugees or asylum seekers are involuntarily relocated to countries where they might be in danger—was a death sentence. Since Australia is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the government’s attempt at refoulement violated the convention and an essential principle of international human rights law. By keeping him off Australian soil, he could not apply for asylum, although years into his time on Manus he was informed that he could apply to become a citizen of Papua New Guinea. This provided another paradox.

The Papus, the natives of Papua New Guinea, were also his jailers because the detention center provided much-needed jobs to the poverty-ridden country. Although the Papus were not as vicious as the Australian guards, they nonetheless collaborated as willing partners in an inhumane carceral system that was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea in 2016.¹² Boochani’s book revealed his dismal choices, and Australians, newly cognizant of the effects their government’s practice of “refugee offshoring” and the conditions at the detention centers, recognized themselves as complicit in schemes intended to break the will and spirit of the detainees. Writing in the foreword, Richard Flanagan compared the treatment of Australians in Japanese POW camps during World War II to the treatment of the migrants in detention camps and asked, “What has become of us when it is we who now commit such crimes?”¹³ I hear an echo of Boochani’s *ghazal* in Flanagan’s question, as if he is also saying, *I can’t believe this is happening to us, who have we become?* This shift transforms the memoir into a reflection of the national imaginary that illuminates not shared ideals and moral values but shared offenses. The imaginary is gone, too, replaced by the effects of concrete policy and named people, living and dead.

Questioning Humanitarian Care

A war waged with numbers /
A numbers war /
The frisking hands of the Papus /
The imposing stares of the Australian officers /
The prisoners trapped in a tunnel of tension /
A huge feature of everyday life for the prisoners /
Day to day . . . /
A monstrous part of life /
This is what life has become, after all . . . /
This is one model constructed for human life /
Killing time by leveraging the queue as a technology /

*Killing time through manipulating and exploiting the body /
 The body left vulnerable /
 The body an object to be searched /
 Examined by the hands of others /
 The body susceptible to the gaze of others /
 A program for pissing all over life.¹⁴*

This *ghazal* from deep in the memoir, written as Boochani's detention stretched past its fourth year, tried to make sense of the system in the detention center, which he knew was a fool's pursuit. The carceral system was designed to make sure no daily patterns were regularized and no routines were continual, keeping the detainees in an endless state of confusion. The offshore detention centers of Operation Sovereign Borders were meant to be punitive and degrading, a "program for pissing all over life," as Boochani wrote, although the detainees were never charged with or convicted of any crime. Queuing for food and toilets took an entire day. He wrote that "young men [stood] in the sun for hours, queuing for dirty, poor-quality food. The meat [was] like pieces of car tyre. Jaws struggle[d] to chew the badly cooked meat."¹⁵ Sunburns from the queues, damaged teeth from the meat, communicable disease, malnourishment, and bites from pests in the jungle created healthcare needs that either went untreated or, if the injured detainee was allowed to visit the clinic, subjected him to levels of degradation that included, among other things, twelve body searches a day. When Boochani had a toothache, he refused to visit the clinic, called IHMS, because of the humiliation that accompanied a visit and the indifference of the staff. Instead, he allowed the Papus to insert "a red-hot wire right into the hole of [his] bastard of a tooth," knowing that if "he had confronted the IHMS system [his] soul would have been engulfed in thousands of IHMS letters, reports, and forms . . . and then annihilated."¹⁶ The prisoners admitted to the clinic soon found that they filled in forms and waited in lines for days to be placed on Schedule A, B, or C, depending on which doctor would visit when. The doctors, Boochani explained, were "perceived as messiahs, saviours, but none ever set foot on the island or in the prison. They are scheduled to come next month. But they never arrive."¹⁷

Boochani describes the waiting—for food, for doctors, for immigration lawyers, for news that his incarceration might end—as "a mechanism of torture used in the dungeon of time," and this, too, differentiates his account.¹⁸ The refugees arrived on Manus shaken from their journey; when they finally left, they were scarred mentally and physically, and twelve were dead. As of this writing in mid-2022, 112 refugees remain on Nauru Island at a cost to Australian taxpayers of \$220 million every six months.¹⁹ New Zealand has agreed to offer those remaining a path to citizenship over the next three years, but by 2025, many will have been in the "dungeon of time" for more than twelve years.²⁰

This kind of waiting does not fit into what is typically considered humanitarian aid because its cure is political, not material. It cannot be fixed by a doctor or with more food or with a safe place; this kind of waiting in detention or in a refugee camp is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy,” as opposed to situations that are “catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime.”²¹ Boochani details the care received in both types of situations—from the chronic and cruddy in the detention center described above to the catastrophic and sublime in his rescue at sea that follows—and each time it is inadequate.

After a terrifying night in the waves, Boochani and his fellow migrants were rescued by an Indonesian fishing vessel working in the same waters. The Indonesian sailors hauled the migrants aboard, and when the sun rose, the migrants realized they were in the shadow of an enormous British cargo ship stacked with containers that reached “the ceiling of the sky.”²² Blond-haired British sailors peered at the migrants from above then showered them with fresh water to remove the salt and sea from their tired bodies. Moments later the sailors lowered a small platform from their ship with packets of biscuits, cigarettes, and bottles of water. “The whole encounter with the British ship,” Boochani wrote, “[was] characterized by extraordinary kindness,” although the packet of biscuits was the only thing Boochani would eat for the next four days.²³

Despite the size and stores of the British ship, the migrants remained on the Indonesian vessel without food for four more days because the Indonesian sailors had no food to share. Dazed with hunger, Boochani threatened other passengers to give him something to eat but soon recognized his folly: “Just imagine my behaviour, imagine my gestures, imagine me making that pronouncement. Imagine me, whose ribs are protruding from his body. Imagine me, a man whose ribs are so visible you could count them. Imagine me in this state, trying to assert myself in this way. What a ridiculous scene.”²⁴ He was powerless and without the physical strength to demand a thing even as he was tethered to a boat that towered with commodities. When he thought he might die from hunger, Boochani found one greasy peanut behind the boat’s engines that sustained him for the rest of the trip. Instead of lowering more food, the British sailors leaned over their decks to snap pictures with their cell phones, and in this moment, Boochani’s mirror reflects the Western helper in a disconcerting way. The reader’s gaze moves from the starving migrant to the copiously provisioned photographers to witness the disparities of aid. With extraordinary kindness, aid provides temporary but inadequate relief.

Boochani’s description of his bare existence on the boat and in the camp disrupted humanitarian imaginaries, which at least presume a level of adequate care where it can be given, especially by wealthy nations whose national constitutions support basic human rights. While declarations of human rights grant dignity to the stateless and least fortunate in society regardless of circumstance, in practice, they are inextricably bound to political shifts. Under

the present configuration of sovereign powers with the capacity to withhold or deny rights, citizens with rights are fated to observe “minimalist biopolitics,” which are defined as the temporary administration of survival within wider circumstances that do not favor it.²⁵ In the detention center on Manus Island, in circumstances that correspond to the “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy,” the prisoners were methodically demeaned. They were given just enough food to induce constant hunger but not starvation; they were supplied with latrines, but no tools to clean them, so they moved among foot-deep filth and stench; they were given beds and shelter, but in enclosures that broiled under the jungle sun making sleep a nightly leaching of sweat onto perpetually sodden mattresses. The aid Boochani received—from his rescue at sea to the day the detention center was officially closed in 2019—maintained minimal physical existence but destroyed the dignity or recognition afforded human beings in international treaties and humanitarian imaginaries. Although his story reveals different things to different readers, his discussions about humanitarian care implicate Western readers in the inadequacies of aid and make visible the systems at work that render the poor and disenfranchised powerless and dependent.

Rethinking the Emergency Imaginary

*This whole mess /
 In the darkness of midnight /
 Looks like death /
 Smells like death /
 Embodies death /
 The cries /
 The screams /
 The swearing /
 The knocking about /
 The sounds of the small children /
 The heart-wrenching and painful sounds of the little children /
 These sounds transform the chaotic boat into hell.²⁶*

In this *ghazal*, Boochani painted a sensory picture of the dark hours of terror in the Banda Sea. Waves crashed down on the boat, there was no light, there was nothing to do but hold tight to something bolted down and try to gauge the impact of the next wave. I have read scenes like this in other books, so I thought I had a good idea of what was happening and how it might feel, but the intensity of this *ghazal*—and many others within Boochani’s telling of the night—make me question how much I can understand this type of desperation. What can I know if the person who had the experience has to break form to approximate it? This *ghazal* signals a pause in the bearable, a time when he

could only choke on what was happening. For those escaping from somewhere hoping to reach somewhere better, this terror is an acceptable risk. The children's screams haunted Boochani that night and long after; his description of them haunts me, too, because it disrupts my emergency imaginary.

The emergency imaginary is curated by media outlets that carefully reproduce a few images from the thousands available to them to present the idea of emergency viewers and readers already know.²⁷ We are consistently presented with images that suggest “what men should be shown doing and women and children should be shown experiencing—we are accustomed to the look of violence, suffering, and need.”²⁸ We are also accustomed to the look of aid. Western media, NGOs, and governmental aid organizations present images that show their capacity to alleviate suffering. The situation is usually narrated by someone else, an observer half a world away, or someone at the scene with the luxury to retreat. It is also narrated as an immediate need with a material solution, not a constellation of problems and crises often brought on by the inaction of the same governments coming to the rescue. Those in need are almost always rendered as voiceless, suffering masses or women and children. To combat the erasure of those in need, Boochani universalized the names he assigned his fellow travelers. He called them The Blue Eyed Boy, The Toothless Fool, The Penguin, The Guy With A Ponytail, and The Robust Muscular Guy, among others. Each is named with a capital-T “The,” rendering them both singular and universal, and each is instrumental for the other's survival.

In his writing and his naming, Boochani presented an emergency that was not sated by Western aid. Aid, when delivered, was always the barest of offerings to maintain life at its most minimal. It was not enough when the British sailors offered biscuits, nor when the migrants were finally rescued by the Australian navy. The migrants were not being cared for; they were being managed. The real care given was between those sharing hardship, as it often is during emergencies. During Boochani's night of terror in the waves, the water pump died on the smuggler's boat while many of the passengers sprawled across the decks, sleeping out their exhaustion. “The water pump is a corpse,” he observed, “as unmoving as the bodies all over the deck.”²⁹ As sea water flooded the engine room, he formed a bailing chain with The Blue Eyed Boy and the captain's assistant—two buckets at a time to empty a room waist deep with water and leaking gasoline. The Robust Muscular Guy and The Guy With A Ponytail stepped in to help when the first team—malnourished and weak even before the need for exertion—began to flag. Boochani revealed that as kind as Western aid could be, it was a small part of what sustained his humanity during his emergency and its long, cruddy aftermath. The aid he received, whether by choice or by necessity, represents much of the aid given in emergency situations—small bursts of sustenance that have little effect on the larger problems that cause prolonged precarity. The nourishment he needed to

maintain his humanity came from his fellow travelers and prisoners, whom he presented with multivalent personalities. Some were sympathetic, some brave, and some gentle, but others were not. Some were nasty, rough, or selfish, and Boochani's narrative challenged the idea that one needs to be "good" in order to be deserving, and that all aid is good, despite how it is packaged in photos or documentaries. In contrast to the emergency imaginary Western viewers are accustomed to, Boochani presented a form of care not usually recognized. He individualized this care with naming and so conveyed the realized capacity of *this* Robust Muscular Guy and *every* robust muscular guy who steps in where others or where nature create suffering.

This distinction purposefully differentiated voices normally marginalized in states of emergency. Boochani and Tofighian recognized their book as an explicit way to make claims on identity when other forces, such as the Papua New Guinean offshore camps supported by the Australian government, aimed to erase it. Tofighian was deeply engaged with Boochani's effort to name people, events, and systems at play within the detention center to make sure they were not swept away as distant situations happening to some distant other. He wrote that for Boochani, naming was "a way to affirm his personhood and establish a sense of authority; naming [was also] a way of reclaiming authority from the prison, disempowering the system and redirecting sovereignty back to the land."³⁰ Naming impacts the reader, too, so stories blurred by crowds or large numbers are refined and sharpened around a single individual in which readers might recognize themselves, or those they know. By awarding him with their highest honors, the Australian literary community recognized Boochani not as a migrant or a refugee or a prisoner but as a named and worthy individual in much the same way he recognized his fellow prisoners. In addition, the book created a wider circle of belonging of those who consumed his experience as observers yet recognized themselves as helping with aid that did not satisfy actual need.

Then What Makes This Book So Different?

Boochani is not the first writer to weave poetry into his prose, and a sweaty, stinking, insect-infested prison does not lend itself to the form as we generally conceive of it, but the long history of the *ghazal* distinguishes its inclusion here. As a collection of broken shards, the *ghazals* elevate *No Friend but the Mountains* beyond memoir to a reflection of views often left unconsidered or unobserved, like the images of the British sailors snapping pictures of the migrants instead of feeding them, or the Australian jailers responding to prisoners with force and obfuscation, or the Papu helpers reaping economic gain from unethical behavior, or other prisoners slowly descending into mental

anguish and physical decay. These images shift the focus from the author's experience by showing the multiple consequences of Australia's offshore processing scheme, disrupting any single imaginary and complicating unity, a move that makes defining the "good guys" and the "bad guys" nearly impossible. The Australians, the Papus, and the British used the refugees to satisfy political or economic interests, which left Boochani and others like him on a prolonged odyssey of suffering and denial reflected in the book's style and title. That the Kurds have "no friends but the mountains" is a saying in their folklore born out in regions where they are fighting to establish a united Kurdistan and in the hostile environments they encounter even when they leave.³¹ These interwoven realities reflected in Boochani's writing implicate the Western reader in disturbing, uncomfortable ways and speak to a readership beyond the confines of Western logics.

After what Boochani revealed, Aboriginal leaders rejected the authority of Australia's government to deny entry to anyone at any point along their national border. In protest, they sailed a flotilla to Manus Island in 2019 to distribute Aboriginal First Nations passports to the refugees.³² Much like the gesture of citizenship Australia's literary community made with their awards, the actions of the Aboriginal leaders exposed the way politics played refugees as pawns in intersecting power struggles. All at once, the refugees on Manus Island were foils for the political might of Australia's conservative government, bodies co-opted in protest by the literary community, symbols of resistance for Aboriginal leaders, and examples of the limits of political systems. Yet even as their standing as a group was essential within these dynamics, the majority of them could only observe and be acted upon—individual refugees have few ways to make claims on their own behalf. Left in this impotent position, Boochani adapted in the only way he could: he wrote. His clandestine texts made readers witness to state practices that not only violated Australian and Papua New Guinean law but undermined international law.

Within his retelling, Boochani also showed how wealthy countries have shifted their humanitarian responsibilities to countries in the global South lacking the same standards for care that would be necessary if refugees were housed on their soil. This practice presumes the only ones who suffer are the displaced, but, in reality, host countries in the global South bearing the burdens of refugee resettlement are stretched beyond what they can accommodate and compromised by their willing participation. Citizens in wealthy nations, cognizant of the effects their country's harmful policies create, can respond with destabilizing resistance, and refugees, the people at the heart of migration issues, are exploited as expendable political or economic tools. In short, none of the participants is unharmed, especially the refugee who is dehumanized and suspended between death and life at its most minimal. Boochani's memoir made these overlapping intersections of politics and human rights visible and

forced questions about borders as political containers in the imaginations of like-minded communities. For countries like Australia and the United States, historically populated by immigrants fleeing war, oppression, and lack of opportunity, *No Friend but the Mountains* prompts the questions: Why are open borders now closed, as if the process of becoming a nation is complete? And why are those seeking entry like Boochani judged so differently from those already inside, as if citizenship also conveys moral worth?

The imaginaries for both countries favor strong individuals willing to strike out despite hardship, to work hard and direct their destiny for the better, and to be optimistic in the face of adversity. Throughout Boochani's memoir, he described migrants and refugees with these characteristics in abundance, yet each day of waiting in political purgatory chipped them away so that the carceral system purporting to preserve a national imaginary was simultaneously eroding it. Boochani recognized this, and so did the Australian awards committee, which gave his powerful book an equally powerful afterlife. Because I've read so many refugee accounts, I spent much of this one looking for similarities to the others, but that unsettled feeling I had when I finished revealed a distinct difference. Was I also a character here? A Western reader reflected in the shards of Boochani's experience? As I see it, yes, I was—I am—and I suspect the Australians who reacted to the book, both the Aboriginals offering passports and the literary community offering awards, saw themselves as characters, too. The questions of representation that nagged at me throughout my many readings of *No Friend but the Mountains* were answered in its prose and *ghazals*. Boochani's testimony disrupted unities of voice and narrative by reflecting characters intricately bound to his story and peripherally complicit in its causes and effects.

Megan Butler is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Washington. Her interdisciplinary work bridges English, global mental health, and medical humanities. She worked in the publishing industry for twenty years before directing three local nonprofits for women and children living below the poverty line. Her dissertation, *Writing the Refugee: Labeling, Literature, and the Shifting Imaginary of a Field*, focuses on the changes in literature by and about refugees published over the last twenty years.

Notes

1. Wahlquist, "Behrouz Boochani."
2. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 397.
3. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, xii.
4. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, xiii.

5. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24.
6. Ford, "Guarding Our Borders."
7. Hall, "Like Looking in a Broken Mirror."
8. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 88.
9. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 77.
10. Phillips et al., "Boat Arrivals" (emphasis mine).
11. Yaxley, "Kevin Rudd."
12. Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* addresses the distinctions between the Australian and Papu guards throughout. More information about the relationship between PNG citizens and the camps can be found in the documentaries *One Way to Manus* and *Manus: Remember One Thing, We Are Human Beings*.
13. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, xiii.
14. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 307.
15. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 190.
16. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 308.
17. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 312.
18. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 62.
19. Frost, "In Reversal."
20. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 62.
21. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 132.
22. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 46.
23. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 46.
24. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 51.
25. Redfield, "Doctors, Borders," 344.
26. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 26.
27. Calhoun, "Idea of Emergency," 33.
28. Calhoun, "Idea of Emergency," 33.
29. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 22.
30. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 374.
31. Açıksöz, *Sacrificial Limbs*, 17.
32. McNevin, "Refugees."

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