



No Friend but the Mountains and Manus prison theory

In conversation

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Abstract

This article is an edited version of a conversation that took place on 4 August 2019 at the State Library of Queensland located on the traditional lands of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples. This article is part of a series of published conversations between Behrouz Boochani and Omid Tofighian, author and translator (one instalment also includes interlocutors from a 2020 UK tour), about the book *No Friend but the Mountains* and Manus Prison theory. During the event Behrouz was speaking via Skype from Manus Island in PNG, and Omid was in Australia while on break from teaching at the American University in Cairo, Egypt. In this conversation they explore many of the central issues raised by the book and the accompanying translator's essays.

Keywords: asylum, Manus, Australia, borders, refugees

Introduction

Since 1992 Australia has been indefinitely detaining people seeking asylum who arrive by boat. Immigration detention centres have been set up around the country for this purpose with most of them in remote locations where there is little or no access to amenities, services and community and legal support networks. In 2001 the conservative Howard government set up offshore detention centres on former colonies Nauru (for women, unaccompanied minors and families) and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (men travelling alone)—this iteration of immigration detention was called the ‘Pacific Solution’. After their closure by the subsequent Labor government under Kevin Rudd offshore detention centres were reopened (by Labor under Julia Gillard) in what was considered phase two of the Pacific Solution (2012/13).

In 2013 the Rudd government announced that anyone who arrived by boat after July 19 would never be allowed to enter Australia—people who arrived after this date were exiled indefinitely to Nauru and Manus Island and since then a whole range of brutal measures have been taken to ensure detainees are not transferred to Australia or resettled in a safe third country. Behrouz Boochani’s boat crossed into Australian waters four days after this policy was introduced in 2013. Later in the same year the newly elected conservative government under Tony Abbott and immigration minister Scott Morrison (who is now PM at the time of writing) introduced Operation Sovereign Borders which enhanced the securitisation and militarisation of Australia’s border regime. Since 2013 there have been thirteen deaths from Manus Island and Nauru and hundreds still have no clear way to safety and freedom.

Immediately after his incarceration Behrouz began documenting events, experiences and analysis from inside what he calls Manus Prison in the form of journalism articles, a feature length film, a book and numerous social media posts and public speaking engagements. Omid has been translating Behrouz's work since the beginning of 2016—most notably his book *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* (Picador 2018) which won the Victorian Prize for Literature, Australia's richest literary award—and collaborating with him on different forms of writing and resistance. They have also been producing scholarship during this time and developing what they call Manus Prison theory.

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Behrouz is a Kurdish Iranian writer, journalist, scholar, cultural advocate and film maker. From 2013 to 2019 he was detained on Manus Island; he worked tirelessly to give voice to those detained on Manus, a commitment he has continued after escaping to New Zealand in 2019. In 2018 he released his award-winning book *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison*. Omid is a lecturer, researcher and community advocate combining philosophy with interests in citizen media, popular culture, displacement and discrimination, he is also campaign manager for *Why Is My Curriculum White?—Australasia*. Both are affiliated with universities in Australia and the UK.

In terms of political critique, structure, style and themes, the discussion is a unique intervention and represents different debordering practices. The interlocutors create spaces and openings for critically analysing and

dismantling border politics. They discuss their author-translator collaboration which also involved other supporters; the use of WhatsApp text message communication and writing using a smart phone; representation and critical reflection on the lived experience and the development of necessary critical tools and theoretical frameworks; the unique positionality of the writer conditioned by displacement, exile and incarceration; translation as a political act and the role of identity, experience and training in relation to the translator; literary experimentation in the translation process; the notion of a shared philosophical activity when collaborating with displaced and exiled peoples; displacement and exile as epistemic standpoints; the border industrial complex, the kyriarchal system, and the symmetrical relationship between the border and the nation.

Writing from prison, translating beyond borders

Behrouz: For years I was working as a journalist on Manus Island and I was trying to expose how the system has been torturing people, how the government has been running this prison camp. So far 12 people have died in Manus Island and in Nauru (there has been one more death after this conversation). Hundreds of people have been damaged. We have been living under a very cruel system, for years I have been working, I have been publishing journalism, and also engaging in many interviews; actually, hundreds or perhaps thousands of interviews over the past six years. But I realised that people were still following this policy; that is, they had no idea what life was like inside the prison camp. Until now people still don't understand a major part of this system.

My understanding is that this prison system is very complicated, and I refer to it with the concept 'systematic torture'. The language of journalism was incapable of telling this story, incapable of communicating this tragedy. I relied on artistic language. I made a movie *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*; it is available on Vimeo, it's 90 minutes long. It's about the life inside the prison camp. And then I decided to focus on literature. Literary language is a free language, it is a strong and powerful language. My aim was to help readers by taking them into the prison camp so that they understand life inside and how the system works and how it is designed to torture people and take people's

identity. This is why I relied on literary language. I could have written a simple book a long time ago, I could've written two or three books using journalistic language, but I thought it would be better to tell this story with literary language. This is why we produced this book.

The process of writing was very hard because I wrote the whole book by WhatsApp. I remember that for most of the time I was writing we weren't allowed to access phones. After over three years the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Supreme Court ruled that keeping people in prison like that was illegal. We could only access phones after three years of being held there. During the first three years I didn't feel safe; every two or three weeks the authorities ordered hundreds of guards to attack our rooms. They used to attack our rooms in the morning, at 5 o'clock or 4 o'clock. They would wake us up and search our bodies, search our property. I knew it was not safe to write this book on paper. We lost our property on many occasions. So the best way for me was to write using WhatsApp and send it text by text, so it was a very long and hard process but I am happy that we did it by WhatsApp because the important thing for me was to produce my work.

Omid: When I hear my name associated with translation I think: are they talking about me? It's still really hard for me to grasp the fact that I'm involved in this, that I'm so deeply involved in translation and thinking theoretically about the process, thinking about the act of translation, the discipline of translation.

My first experiences with translation were growing up and interpreting for my parents. I never realised that I was developing a skill over many, many years. So once I got involved in working with people who had experienced displacement and exile, and then finally coming across Behrouz's work, I realised that this skill is something I could use in different and more progressive ways, I realised that I could actually use it to create change.

At the beginning of 2016 I read one of Behrouz's articles in *The Guardian*. It was the first time that he had published in *The Guardian* and, Moones Mansoubi, his first translator, helped him with that particular article. When I found it online and read it I thought, first, there's something extremely special about this. I could tell it had philosophical depth and there was a very keen and well-trained political mind, an intellectual mind, behind it. Second, there

was also something very powerful in terms of emotion and the use of literary techniques in the article. I could see all these different layers appearing and I thought I've really got to let this person know that I appreciate his work and that it's had a profound effect on me. For me, the article was unprecedented. So I contacted Behrouz, we started a slow conversation through Facebook and then we moved to WhatsApp. When he found out I was an academic he asked if I would be able to help with translation if he had trouble finding someone. I explained that I wasn't a translator, but I would certainly do my best. I translated one article, the response was good... and here we are.

I have tried my best to come up with the right kind of terms, or the right kind of framework, to analyse what Behrouz has written. First of all, I refer to what he's produced as an anti-genre. The fact that he mixes all of these different styles, techniques and structures together resists any kind of categorisation, or any kind of classification. Actually, it requires that we re-think what we understand as genre. What he's created is actually an anti-genre.

Also, he uses dream visions in his flashbacks and flash forwards and, therefore, creates a particular kind of world. He tries to draw us into a particular kind of experience—the lived experience. I thought the best way to think about this is by using the concept of 'horrific surrealism'. What I mean by this is a mixture of surrealism, a very context or culturally based kind of surrealism which actually goes back to his Kurdish heritage, and psychological horror or horror realism. I thought this idea of horrific surrealism really encompasses what he's done in terms of the anti-genre.

Behrouz wrote the whole book in Farsi prose. In his text messages he was basically writing prose. But Farsi is a very melodic, rhythmic or poetic language. So, in many instances, the prose is very similar to poetry, and there are also a lot of references to the poetic tradition and different oral traditions in Iran. When I was trying to translate, I noticed that the sentences were extremely long. Farsi is an Indo-European language; it's similar to romance languages and also German. Sentences are very long with the subject at the beginning and the main verb right at the end, and in between there are a lot of different clauses—like German. I thought that if I translate this with the same sentence structure it's going to be very difficult to read in English, it's going to lose all of

its melody, all of its poetic resonance and it's not going to be interesting. I thought that I need to split this up which required that I repeat subjects, verbs, adverbs, adjectives and phrases. After about the second review I noticed that there were certain passages that actually sound like poetry—so we thought why not translate Farsi prose into English poetry.

The Kyriarchal System: interlocking and multiplying systems of oppression, domination and subjugation

Behrouz: The kyriarchal system is a term I use to describe the system and how it's designed to take our identity, our individuality, our humanity and morality. How it creates hate and forces people to hate each other. How it forces people to forget about morality, forget about humanity and reduce them to only some numbers. For example, you know my name in this system is MEG45, so they never call me Behrouz; they call me MEG45. They reduce people to numbers. This is how the system works; of course, it's okay for a week or two; for this short time people can survive in a system like this. But not for four years, not for five years, not for six years. I use the term 'kyriarchal system' to describe what systematic torture is and exactly what the term systematic torture means.

The kyriarchal system is a concept that also helps us understand the Manus Prison system beyond *this* prison. We analyse this system in relation to other parts of Australian society; there are some similarities between the Manus Prison system and structures within Australia, like the universities. Universities are very similar to the Manus Prison system in so many ways. Also, consider military sites, hospitals and the education system. There are similarities everywhere between the system in Manus and the system in Australia and other western societies. In universities the system forces many of the academics and researchers to make money for the university while it actually takes their freedom, takes their identity. The university is just one example I'm using here. This is why many people in the universities are unhappy and feel that the university system has control over them and takes their identity, takes their freedom. They feel they are not free people while they work in that system, which creates too much stress, too many problems for them. This concept helps us understand other parts of Australian society and other western countries. But what I claim in this book is that the main example of the kyriarchal system is in

Manus. The extreme version of this system is in Manus—it exists in Manus. The best way to understand the other part of the society is to understand the Manus Prison system; the way they force people to stay in the line, wait in the queue for two hours to get an orange, the way they force people to stay in the line for two hours to get a razor, two hours to have a shower... for everything. They force us to stay in the queue and take hours and hours from us. Also, they refer to people as numbers and also put them through an extreme bureaucratic system, an extreme bureaucratic process. We can see these similarities in the various parts of society.

When you are sick and go to the hospital you try to make an appointment, and when you get an appointment the system forces you to wait. I've commented on how people with disabilities in Australia are experiencing hardship; their situation has become harder over the past four or five years. What I'm trying to say is that the government has learned a lot from this exile policy, it has learned a lot from this prison system as they have maintained it for years and years. Now they are recreating this system, developing and expanding it to Australian society. They are running Australian society like a camp, like a prison camp, in so many ways. I have many examples.

Omid: People who are locked up in Manus Island experience Australia in a very particular way. They see what Australia, as a collective, is capable of. If you were to ask people in Australia, individual citizens, would you inflict systematic torture on people seeking asylum here, would you be able to lock someone in a room and subject them to this kind of punishment, constantly torment them, watch them ask for help, ask for assistance and then increase the pressure, I'm willing to say that there are very, very few people who would actually do it. But why is it that as a collective, as a community, as a nation this sort of thing is allowed to happen and intensify in such a really brutal way?

In my thought experiment at the beginning of the translator's reflection essay accompanying the book I try to show that the people in Manus Island can see something about settler colonialism and about settlers in Australia that we, as settlers, can't see. There is special knowledge in Manus Island and that's something that is extremely important about the book. The book is pedagogical, it's educative. The book creates new knowledge for us. There's

something that refugees who have been subject to our policies, subject to our harsh treatment can tell us about ourselves. And in many ways settlers in Australia become the prisoners. We're the ones whose creativity, whose possibilities for producing knowledge and whose ambitions for freedom are being stunted. In fact, we need to start seeing ourselves as part of the collective that's torturing people.

Coloniality and borders/decolonisation and debordering

Behrouz: The first thing that we should recognise and acknowledge is that Manus Prison and Nauru didn't just emerge suddenly in a void. They definitely relate to the history of colonialism in Australia—the history of Australia and its political culture. If one reads Australian history and modern history one can see the similarities, one can see many replicas of what's happening in Manus and Nauru in past centuries. Certainly, this prison camp emerged out of the history of Australia. It is part of Australia's colonial imaginary. Manus Prison and Nauru are definitely part of Australia, they are established by Australia, they are run by Australia and its political culture. Therefore, no one can claim that we are separate from Australia.

For instance, in politics there is one important example that relates to the negative consequences of keeping people in Manus and Nauru. Many in Australia talk about how the Labor Party is not a real opposition, how they take a defensive posture in relation to the Liberal Party (conservative party in Australia also referred to as the Coalition), they do what the Liberal Party wants and copy what it is doing. It is important to note that the first time the Labor Party started to occupy this defensive position in relation to the Liberal Party was regarding this policy. For years and years, the Labor Party helped keep the Liberal Party in government and agreed with them as they made many laws, they helped pass many bills against us even though they witnessed as we suffered what the government has been doing. They were also acting defensively, and now we can see that they are defensive in other fields, in taxation, in economy, the environment, in many things. But the first time that they took this posture was in relation to this policy.

Recently Minister of Home Affairs Peter Dutton ordered the Australian Federal Police to raid the offices of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the home of one of its journalists to collect information, which was something very strange to see in a liberal democracy. But this happened in Manus and Nauru five years ago, six years ago, four years ago. They prevented journalists from having access to these prison camps and they prevented the media from having access to the necessary information because of national security. They say they applied censorship because of national security. They say we don't want to share this information; we don't want the people of Australia to know how we spent \$9 billion in Manus and Nauru.

Omid wanted to visit me last month and they deported him, they didn't let him to come here. And they have deported many journalists. There were many incidents that occurred in Manus and Nauru that threatened freedom of speech; these have been occurring for years and years. I always use this phrase: dictatorship is like a cancer. If you don't prevent it it's going to expand to other parts of the body, and we can see how certain things happen in Manus and Nauru and then expand to Australian society.

So, what is happening here: there is a dictatorship, there has been secrecy around this policy for years and years. People in Australia still don't know what is really happening here. Sometimes I think that if I didn't write this book people would never know about this system. But now we have these materials and there are other people who work on this subject. Of course, Manus and Nauru are a part of Australia. I only gave you a few political examples, but this is about more than your political culture—it is about your humanity, morality and values, it is about the principals that Australians always claim to be proud of. They always say we are a privileged country, that we have this system, we have a democratic culture in this country. This situation deeply affects all of these things. Two years ago, I remember that Peter Dutton asked Australian people not to show compassion to the people in Manus and Nauru. He asked people to be cruel. This is the real danger for a society like Australia. What is happening here reflects the system of a real dictatorship. I was born in a dictatorship, a religious dictatorship. I grew up in that system and I left my country because of that system. I know when I am confronted with a dictatorship. When I came here—actually, I didn't come here, they exiled me—

I was confronted with another kind of dictatorship. There is a new kind of fascism in power in Manus and Nauru. I am living between a religious dictatorship and another oppressive system; I cannot return to the place I fled and now I cannot go to Australia, so I don't know where I should go. It's easy for people to say 'go back to your country'. It is easy to say, but we cannot go back. I cannot go back to that religious dictatorship; I am not a religious person and I cannot live in that system. Manus and Nauru are part of Australia and one should never forget that we committed no crime... we committed no crime.

The border-nation dynamic: Manus Prison=Australia

Omid: One thing that is really helpful is to think about Manus and Nauru as laboratories. What's happened over the last six years has affected Australia in such a way that it's reduced our capacity to be compassionate. Throughout history one of the ways that dictatorships and oppressive regimes have done that is with the use of language. One can see it happening in Manus and Nauru—in all detention centres, actually—with the use of numbers, using false concepts such as the term 'illegal' and 'queue jumper', referring to people as 'unauthorised'. There are a whole range of different terms created to basically criminalise people who the government feels are undesirable.

By using literature Behrouz has done something really special. He's put the politicians in the corner. He's put them in detention, in other words. He put them in a double bind. They can either ignore Behrouz, which is what they're doing, and become the subject of satire and also opened the door for Behrouz to do almost anything he likes in terms of his creativity, his intellectual work, his reporting. But, on the other hand, if they mention his name, if they take the other approach and they name him, if they attack him, they talk about him and critique him or try to exclude, marginalise or stigmatise him, suddenly MEG45 becomes a human being. Suddenly we start to see a face, we start to see a personality, we see a history, we see another human being who has capacity, who has dignity, who has identity, the same as us. This is one of the reasons why the major politicians won't mention his name; they realise that intellectually, psychologically Australia will start to see these people who they've criminalised in a different light.

The magic that Behrouz creates in this book, the depth of the book comes in this multi-layered approach. He creates characters that completely disrupt all the kinds of stereotypes and the classifications and the binaries that exist when it comes to refugees. For instance, Behrouz doesn't depict refugees as saints, he also doesn't represent them as evil in the way that the government does, doesn't criminalise them. He presents them as human beings like all of us, people with hopes and dreams, aspirations, special qualities... and as humans with flaws.

He talks at length about how the system has created a situation where people start to hate each other, where people start to work against each other. This is the foundation of the kyriarchal system that he's talking about, a system that's designed to pit people against each other. It's not just in the detention centre, it happens in our own societies, it happens in our workplaces, it happens in our schools. The system he's talking about is one that pervades Australia society, culture, politics and economy.

What's important about the production of Behrouz's book is that it reveals a more complex side of refugees. It's important that somebody like me, for instance, can't occupy the position of saviour with Behrouz in the position of the victim. I'm not simply helping him; in fact, he's guiding me, he's teaching me, he's opening up spaces for me. He's breaking down this kind of polar opposition between victim and saviour, recipient and supporter, beneficiary and benefactor. In this instance, there's a whole new way of talking about the relationship between people on the border and people inside the border. It creates a whole new language.

Behrouz: This whole system is designed to take our identities and reduce us to just some numbers. So, I want to rename people; to give them names in a poetic way. These are not simple names; I name characters and things in the book in a poetic way to challenge this system and the challenge the language of this system. This is not only the case in the book, I do this with the terms I use in my journalism articles. I don't use the language of the government. For example, they call this place 'offshore processing centre', which is a very stupid name. Offshore processing centre means that they are processing us. We have been here for six years, how are you processing us for six years? What I do

in my journalism, in the book, movie and all my other works, is to create a new kind of language to represent us. This is why I usually don't use the language of the media and other journalists and I create new terms and concepts. For example, I call this policy 'exile policy', I introduce 'political hostages'—we are political hostages here because they won't let us go to other countries and they won't let us go to Australia. I introduce terms like 'systematic torture' and 'kyriarchal system'.

Also, I tried to introduce the refugees in a way that reflects their humanity. They are not depicted as angels. You see, the human rights defenders and advocates look at the refugees in a romantic way, and on other side the right-wing people and racist people associate refugees with criminals, rapists, terrorists and other dangerous people. But I describe refugees as humans, like you, like others who you know. They are not angels and they are not evil they are human; we are humans with different backgrounds, different cultures, different personalities and characters. Many people don't like my work because my work creates a challenge. The people who are used to seeing refugees in a particular way for years and years, for decades, are confronted now with someone who challenges that perspective. Most of the time I make people feel uncomfortable which is good because if I don't make people feel uncomfortable it means that I am not taking the right approach, it means I'm repeating the words of others. There's a long way to go and I don't claim that will change this system; I am only one person and it will take time. But there are many people, many academics and researchers engaging with this body of work. We are working with them and hopefully we can penetrate the education system with this book. Academics are now teaching this book in some universities but there's a long way to go—we just have to keep working.

Politicians don't recognise me or mention my name. I think that they scared of me. I am not saying this because I am a self-centred person. I think they are scared because they think that if they mention my name, they will empower me and recognise that I exist. We exist. I'm not talking about myself, all the refugees in Manus Island, Nauru...we exist, and they cannot deny that. We exist and they cannot deny us. Even if I never go to Australia, I'm still a part of Australia. I have participated in events, I exist in the libraries, I exist in the cinemas and I exist in the universities. Even if the other refugees and I never go

to Australia and go to other countries, we will always be a part of Australia and no one is able to deny that.

Someone like Peter Dutton is just a politician and will lose power one day, but we will continue to exist. No one is able to deny the way the refugees in Manus Island and Nauru have resisted against this system. They have stated that we exist, we exist in different ways. I am only one among many, today I have this opportunity to talk with you but there are many people here who have already shown that we are human and that they cannot deny us that.

Shared philosophical activity; new models for resistance

Omid: The victim saviour binary doesn't exist within this collaboration I'm involved in with Behrouz. In many ways I feel extremely privileged, I feel honoured to be part of this. I realised from the very beginning, from the very first time I read Behrouz's work in that *Guardian* article, that this was going to make an enormous contribution to Australian history, to Australian literature, to the notion of justice or the development of justice in Australia. What Behrouz is doing goes against attempts to deny historical injustices, to deny trans-generational trauma, it goes against attempts to deny the deeply embedded culture or character of colonialism in the country. Behrouz is basically adding to that tradition, adding something to that form of resistance. He is also helping Australia heal, you know in order to move forward we need to accept the fact that these sorts of things are part of Australian history, politics and culture.

I remember when I received the first chapter of his book, after about the second or third page I realised that I was reading a masterpiece and I knew that this was the sort of thing that people would be reading and reflecting on for generations to come. We knew from the beginning that the book wasn't going to change anything in terms of policy, we were realistic about that—the refugees have been in the prison now for six years. We knew that this book wouldn't free anyone from the detention centre, from the prison, but we knew that this was going to affect the next generation. What it has done is create a rupture, it's created a split and I think it's the responsibility of everyone who sees this kind of injustice, realises the colonial nature or the colonial logic that's deeply embedded in border politics here to actually take that gap, or take that rupture,

and split it apart and really initiate transformation. Behrouz has done his work, he's created his book, he's given it to us, he's contributed to history, he's changed the literary scene, he's changed the political narrative...it's our responsibility now to occupy that space.

Behrouz: It is important to acknowledge all of the Australians, all of the people in Australia who have been working against this barbaric policy and rejected this kind of cruelty. These people have supported innocent people in Manus and Nauru for years and years. Many people criticise me and ask why I'm against their country. I respond, I am not working against your country, and many people of Australia faced these criticisms. We are a part of a movement; we are a part of a social movement and we want to work to transform the situation for the better. Actually, I don't even want to go to Australia. Everywhere I go I work to make society and the world a better place. I am not working against Australia; in fact, many Australian people are supporting us, and I want to acknowledge them. I am proud of the people who reject this cruel policy.

The current situation right now according to the government is that there are 450 people in PNG and 350 people in Nauru. But it is another one of their lies. They are lying—the numbers are less than that. Right now, in Manus Island we are less than 140 people—before we were 800 people, now we are less than 140 people—and about 250 people are in Port Moresby. The people in Port Moresby are sick and they keep them in some motels and lock them up in there. They cannot go out and they have limited communication. There are less than 250 people in total in Port Moresby. In Nauru there are less than 250 people. We are not a lot of people. Most of the people in Australia, even the Prime Minister Scott Morrison, expected that Labor will win the last election. We expected Labor to win the election and then accept the New Zealand offer.

We thought we would be going to New Zealand. We were very hopeful, but unfortunately the election turned out the way it did. Many of the refugees on Manus Island started to attempt suicide and self harm. We recorded more than 100 self harm incidents and suicide attempts in less than two months. But now the Medivac law has been passed. If you remember, before the election the government was a minority government in the parliament, and we used that

moment to pass the 'Medivac Bill'.¹ According to this law the government must send sick refugees to Australia to get medical treatment. Medivac is now law and the process is working—we are hopeful. In three months, more people will go to Australia and we expect there will be less than 150 left here in November, I say this because the government is going to change the law.

We don't know what will happen in November 2019, but they are going to change this law (see footnote 1). Right now, as I'm talking with you many people have already been transferred to Australia and we should be hopeful that more people go to Australia. The current situation is that people are depressed, people are really depressed, and they don't go out, they are living in their rooms.

Unfortunately, our experience tells us that PNG politicians—actually, the whole political system in PNG—are corrupt. They already asked the Australia government to close this place and release people, but the problem is that when they asked that, and when they say things like that, they want to get some money from Australia and then just forget about it. So, this is the problem. But we don't know if the current Prime Minister is serious or not, we should wait and see. It seems he is serious but...we should wait.

The Australian Government has never cared about what the PNG Government wants. This is why I call it a classical colonial policy. They have been using these islands for their political benefits for six years and they don't care about the local people and the politicians. We don't know if this new PNG Prime Minister is serious or not. We just need to wait. We have experienced many politicians who have said that, but they received some money and then it was over.

Before the 2019 election and also this morning during other events at the Byron Writers Festival someone raised the question about what the refugee advocates should do to help. Before the election we had many speaking engagements and similar events, almost every day. Two months before the election it was as though our events were part of the election campaign. During all of the events people ask me this question and I answered by saying don't vote for the Liberals and reject them. But so unfortunately that didn't work out. It's really hard to answer this question now, I'm not in a position to tell people what they should do. What I can say is that after six years it is clear that civil society in

Australia, the movement in Australia and people who have the means to support us need to rethink methods for advocating, there needs to be another way to challenge this system. Donating to organisations, for instance, doesn't work. It is the time for thinking about different kinds of advocacy. People need to think about this. I remember five years ago there were protests in cities like Sydney. 1,000 people turned up for the rally and now after six years still 1,000 people turn up. So, I think we should think about this, we should do something else, we should create some new ways to challenge this system. Past actions didn't work, and we should change our ways.

Power, freedom and creativity

Behrouz: About nature: when standing up to the kyriarchal system in Manus or in Australia, or anywhere, I think the best method is to rely on nature and work with the ecosystem. Rely on ecology, rely on nature to feel freedom. In the book nature is central and when people work with nature, they feel freedom, even inside the prison camp.

Omid: For me what was really striking about Behrouz's connection with nature was how he drew on his Kurdish heritage. The title of the book *No Friend But the Mountains* is a very famous Kurdish saying. In the Middle East the Kurds are surrounded by a lot of antagonistic forces and they have also been impacted by Western colonial interference. For hundreds of years they've been defending themselves, defending their land. When under attack they retreat to the mountains, they find sanctuary there, they seek asylum in the mountains. That's where they find protection and that's also where they mobilise and regroup. What's important is that the mountains are not just a source of protection but also a source of inspiration and spirituality for them as well. Behrouz is an Indigenous person to that particular region, so when he was exiled to Manus Island he saw how important land and country and the ecosystem were; he could identify with the Manusian people and could see how colonial forces were using their land, using it as a place to detain unwanted people. This connection with nature has more than just the spiritual or inspirational dimension, it's ontological. There's something essentially human and also something very particular to Behrouz's form of resistance.

Behrouz: I don't know the roots of the kyriarchal system in Australian history, but I think we should look deep into history. We can find the answer not only in the history of Australia. Now in Western countries, and other countries, there are many different kinds of camps, many different kinds. Considering all of this history we notice the development of a language, and this language grows and expands. And the developed of this language has resulted in this system. The Manus Prison system, one can say, is the new or modern version of other camps and other prison systems. Maybe we can say a modern form of slavery. There are many similarities and replicas in the history of Australia. A recent example of this system is when someone like former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologises for what the government did to the stolen generation. That exact same person said that and then he separated many people from their families. He did something similar, they did it with Indigenous peoples and then they did it with refugees in a different way. The important thing is that we recognise that, and the Australian government should recognise that. We need to incorporate it into the education system and educate the young generation, acknowledge the wrongs that have been done in the past. Perhaps, then, we won't see this kind of thing happen again in future. Until Australia, the Australian people and the politicians recognise this and accept these facts then I think nothing will happen. We can't see into the future but history will repeat if it is not addressed properly. In Germany they accepted what they did during the Second World War and they are teaching their children, the young generation, so that they don't do it again. I'm not comparing Manus and Nauru with what happened during the Second World War, but I just want to say that acknowledging injustice is important.

Our video installation *Remain* is in the University of Queensland Art Museum and it's important that you go and see it. It is a video installation that I worked on with Hoda Afshar. It is a great project because you can see there are refugees, the people, you can see them, you can feel them, you see they are human and they are both simple and complicated people, like everyone else. It's important that you see it. I would like to invite everyone to go and watch this video installation, in my view it as a great work and helps you imagine the plight of refugees in Manus Island and Nauru.

BEHROUZ BOOCHANI escaped to New Zealand in November 2019 after acquiring a one-month visa to attend the literary festival, Word Christchurch. He overstayed his visa and his future remains uncertain. **OMID TOFIGHIAN** returned to reside in Sydney.

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Notes

¹ In February 2019 'the Medevac Bill' was passed in the Senate which gave more power to medical opinion in relation to evacuating to Australia refugees incarcerated in Nauru and Papua New Guinea and in need of medical care. In December 2019 the law was repealed.