



Continuum
Journal of Media & Cultural Studies

ISSN: 1030-4312 (Print) 1469-3666 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20>

Manus prison poetics/our voice: revisiting 'A Letter From Manus Island', a reply to Anne Surma

Behrouz Boochani

To cite this article: Behrouz Boochani (2018) Manus prison poetics/our voice: revisiting 'A Letter From Manus Island', a reply to Anne Surma, *Continuum*, 32:4, 527-531, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2018.1501796](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1501796)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1501796>



Published online: 15 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 698



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Manus prison poetics/our voice: revisiting 'A Letter From Manus Island', a reply to Anne Surma

Behrouz Boochani

Sydney Asia Pacific Migration Centre (SAPMiC), The University of Sydney, Manus Island, Papua New Guinea

Even if there were only one person reading my writings beyond this island, I would continue writing for that one reader.

Dear Anne,

This here is a pledge, a personal commitment. I made this pact with myself five years ago, during a time when no one knew where Manus Prison was. And now, after five years, I honestly cannot hide my feelings of joy. I cannot contain the satisfaction and pleasure it gives me to know that there are people in the public sphere and among intellectual circles who critically analyse what Australia is doing on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and the Republic of Nauru (Repubrikin Naoero) from philosophical and historical perspectives. After numerous years of writing from Manus Prison, my work has slowly entered public discourse and scholarly debate. I have discovered people who draw on these writings as foundations for serious academic research, and for me, this is the beginning of new initiatives and future approaches.

On the 23 November 2017, a few buses entered the new prison camp in East Lorengau, the largest town on Manus Island. This camp is thirty-five kilometres from the prison at Lombrum Naval Base, the one that had incarcerated refugees for four and a half years. The arrival of the buses at East Lorengau marked the crushing end of our twenty-three day resistance.¹ The government suppressed the prisoners' stand-off, and the refugees could no longer avoid forced removal.

The scene was like a battlefield.

Dozens of individuals with wounded and bloodied faces and bodies.

Distressed.

Subjugated.

The prisoners disembarked from the buses. The refugees formed a queue. Each one received a package containing a bedsheet, soap and other essentials. This scene affected me profoundly. It was the day after police officers violently hauled me away from the Lombrum Naval Base.

CONTACT Behrouz Boochani  behrouz.booch@gmail.com; omid.tofighian@aucegypt.edu

Translator: Dr. Omid Tofighian, American University in Cairo and the University of Sydney.

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

I sit on the balcony of the new prison camp. I light my cigarette and proceed to write a manifesto, 'A Letter From Manus Island'.²

I felt that our historic stand in the face of oppression was lacking something: it had to be documented in the form of a manifesto. I described the space and the circumstances by reaching deep down, projecting the very depths of what you refer to in your letter, Anne, as a 'different voice'. This manifesto was written in the midst of a tragedy and bears witness to an epic. The words stand like soldiers in a ritual of mourning, weeping over the masses who have fallen. Refugees put their bodies on the line and rose up for twenty-three days. The manifesto reflects the resistance of the refugees, bringing together the genres of epic, political discourse and poetry, and in a peculiar way, embodies a time when the refugees themselves belonged to the realms of epic, political thought and poetry. This 'different voice' is the voice of the defiant refugees, conditioned by the threat of forced transfer from one prison to another, and the tragic circumstances that ensued. Even the author of the manifesto could not contain this voice: it is the voice of a different author. Only the genre of poetry could express the intensity and volume of the message. In these times, when the world has become so compartmentalized, mechanical and mundane, only poetry can convey what that protest at the Lombrum Naval Base prison meant. Poetry: a form of expression that dismantles all these structures.

In your letter, you criticize Western human rights and humanitarian practices, and examine the bureaucratization of advocacy. Bureaucracy pertains to the very *essence* of a prison such as Manus. To critically examine this phenomenon, I use a concept that I call *The Kyriarchal System*.³ It refers to the total experience of Manus Prison and all its internal and external dimensions. The Kyriarchal System is a complex set of structures that subject imprisoned refugees to relentless and pervasive practices of micro-control and macro-control. Refugees are tortured using perverse and targeted rules and regulations; the system transforms prisoners into machines, erasing their human identities, and stripping individuals of autonomy and selfhood. But I imagine that the place I have been calling Manus Prison is a replica of thousands of other constructions that control Western societies: universities, schools, army barracks, governments. All of them, in their own particular ways, participate in The Kyriarchal System that defines Manus Prison.

The Kyriarchal System controls human rights organizations. Through the production of complex and perverse bureaucratic structures, they become harmless, non-confrontational entities that are easily regulated and tempered. My conclusions are based on years of experience working with these organizations. Contemporary human rights advocacy is a global phenomenon that is based on certain predetermined universalist moral principles, and human rights organizations are either direct products of The Kyriarchal System that gives rise to Manus Prison, or are modelled on its characteristics. They confront the ideology spawned by The Kyriarchal System by using the same terminology and concepts devised by the system; that is, they replicate and reinforce discourses that, in many ways, legitimize borders and control of movement.

Media organizations conform to the same terminology constructed by the government – in your letter, you unpack this issue so well. After all these years, the media still calls the prisons on Manus Island and Nauru 'offshore processing centres'. For us, these sites are harsher and

more brutal than prison. Meanwhile, the issues that the media and human rights organizations neglect are those of living-well and freedom. The incarceration of a child in these prisons is an issue worthy of less moral outrage than the suitability of the kind of food provided to that same child. This is Kyriarchal logic and it is truly remarkable. In Australia, imprisoning innocent people has become acceptable, and the notion of imprisoning people for a whole lifetime has become normalized. And this is the reason behind the misguided interpretation of the media, including the ‘pervasive and insistent’ shock-jocks and commentators that you describe, regarding the actions of the refugees during those twenty-three days under siege.

One must not reduce refugees to a general category as the Australian media has so often done. Indeed, they must not be reduced to a vague notion such as ‘refugee’. Their existence as unique persons must not be fragmented or eroded, something that The Kyriarchal System has always tried to do – a system whose objective is to render refugees using a simple, one-dimensional code. *Refugees...* and nothing more. The manifesto is nothing other than an attempt to reclaim our personhood. It claims that we are unique human beings in opposition to a system and culture that has instrumentalized us, and our sense of selfhood, for political ends. The manifesto stands against a system that identifies refugees as numbers, that atomizes each situation as a calculable equation and that tries to change people into machines. A system that diminishes human beings.

The manifesto speaks of the *human* in *humanity*. It expresses a language of empowerment and emancipation: they are part of the refugees’ core message to the world. And for this reason, the different voice presented in this manifesto – in reality, the voice of the refugees under siege – is consolidated by a shared experience of humanity.

Humanity.

Freedom.

Justice.

Love.

It was resistance...

it was pure...

it was true...

... it was beautifully human. It was a bond with nature. It was connected to the land, in communication with the animal world.

The animals, what magnificent allies.

This vision and these values occupy a salient role in the struggle. They are powerful not only because they bring human beings and animals into harmony with each other. They position the worth of animals over and above human beings. And this is a simple philosophy we live by here: One who does not love animals cannot love humans. The realm of nature is a landscape from which we draw power and become inspired to challenge The Kyriarchal System. It is by engaging with the ecosystem that we can oppose regulating structures and experience the exhilaration of freedom – even if only for a short period of time.

You elaborate on my use of this *we*. Solidarity in our community was motivated by a common form of expression empowered by notions of humanity, justice, freedom and

love. The solidarity amongst the refugees was essentially based on a simple philosophy that we might pose as a question: Do humans have any sanctuary except within other human beings? During those days of struggle, the refugees had nowhere to retreat except within the brotherhood of their fellow-prisoners. What we felt was mutual affliction.

Justice.

Freedom.

Humanity...

And love.

Justice, freedom, humanity and love transcend anything that can be imagined, whether by someone living in a village in Kurdistan, in a city such as Sydney, or in a community inside the jungles of Manus Island. *We* refers to all the refugees and encompasses all who participated in acts of solidarity with the refugees during those days. *We* is inspired by a solidarity beyond borders. Everyone in the prison, everyone outside the prison acting in solidarity and understanding: I consider them all as one. A profound experience. Those outside the prison are not engaged simply in gestures of compassion. They share in this profound experience by taking a principled stance with us. Human beings form identity interdependent with one another through love and by striving for justice.

You consider me a brave person. In response, I would like to say that I never consider myself to be a brave person. Actually, this is a confession: the thing that gives my writings and actions courage is merely the fact that I have no choice but to fight, and no option but to resist. I can do nothing but stand up to the manipulative politicians and commentators (as you appropriately describe them), no choice but to stand up against a system that has distorted and degraded my identity.

Finally, this manifesto is a part of Australia's forgotten history, Australia's hidden history, a history excluded from official accounts. In order to understand Australia's role in constructing prisons on Manus Island and Nauru, it is crucial to seek out perspectives that do not corroborate the dominant voices in Australian government and media.

Seek out the human perspective.

Seek out humanity

Seek out the human story...

Human beings, and the affliction they endure.

Notes

1. See "This is hell out here": how Behrouz Boochani's diaries expose Australia's refugee shame', Behrouz Boochani, trans. M. Mansoubi and O. Tofighian, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2017.
2. 'A Letter From Manus Island', Behrouz Boochani, trans. O. Tofighian, *The Saturday Paper*, December 9–15, 2017.
3. *System-e hākem* in Farsi. This is described comprehensively in Behrouz Boochani, trans. O. Tofighian, *No Friend but The Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* (2018, Picador, Sydney).

Notes on contributor

Behrouz Boochani graduated from Tarbiat Moallem University and Tarbiat Modares University, both in Tehran; he holds a Masters degree in political science, political geography and geopolitics. He is a Kurdish-Iranian writer, journalist, scholar, cultural advocate and filmmaker. Boochani was writer for the Kurdish language magazine *Werya*; is Honorary Member of PEN International; winner of an Amnesty International Australia 2017 Media Award, the Diaspora Symposium Social Justice Award, the Liberty Victoria 2018 Empty Chair Award, and the Anna Politkovskaya Award for journalism; and he is non-resident Visiting Scholar at the Sydney Asia Pacific Migration Centre (SAPMiC), University of Sydney. He publishes regularly with *The Guardian*, and his writing also features in *The Saturday Paper*, *Huffington Post*, *New Matilda*, *The Financial Times* and *The SydneyMorning Herald*. Boochani is also co-director (with Arash Kamali Sarvestani) of the 2017 feature-length film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*; collaborator on Nazanin Sahamizadeh's play *Manus*; and author of *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (Picador 2018). Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* (Pan Macmillan-Picador) is due for release on 31 July 2018. Boochani's feature-length film *Chauka, Please Tell Us The Time* (2017), co-directed with Arash Kamali Sarvestani, is available to watch on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/chauka>.