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## In a different voice: 'a letter from Manus Island' as poetic manifesto

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### ABSTRACT

On 9 December 2017, *The Saturday Paper* published 'A Letter from Manus Island', an essay and manifesto written by Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist and refugee being held on Manus Island with hundreds of other men. Boochani writes in a radical, 'poetic' voice that makes the ordinary strange again, as he talks of love, the interdependence of human beings, and the strength to be derived from acts of solidarity. He challenges not only the prevailing vituperative tenor of contemporary public rhetoric, but also the dehumanising discourses within which humanitarian practices in Australia, and in the west more broadly, operate. This paper is written as a letter, in direct reply to Boochani's own. It is inspired by Lilie Chouliaraki's critique of contemporary practices of humanitarianism and the ways in which politics, the market and technology have transformed 'the moral dispositions of our public life'. It explores the unsettling effects and provocative insights presented by Boochani's poetic voice – the refugee as human subject and agent rather than victim or object of pity (or hate). The paper thus reflects on our conventional responses to the ethical call to solidarity from vulnerable subjects and imagines how we might respond otherwise.

### KEYWORDS

Refugees; voice;  
humanitarianism; resistance;  
Behrouz Boochani

Dear Behrouz

Heartfelt thanks for your letter from Manus Island, your manifesto 'for humanity and love', published in *The Saturday Paper* on 9 December 2017.<sup>1</sup> I have read your words and I have listened to them again and again.<sup>2</sup> They are haunting; they speak to me in a different voice.<sup>3</sup>

And after reading and listening, I felt the need to respond to you somehow, but I wasn't sure how.<sup>4</sup> I decided I must write to you, rather than merely write something about what you have written. Perhaps that's presumptuous, since I don't know you, although, of course, I have known of you for a very long time, as one of the so-called 'illegals', 'irregular maritime arrivals', 'economic migrants', 'boat people' and 'queue jumpers' who, travelling by boat, have tried to seek refuge on Australian shores in the last few years.<sup>5</sup> In other words, as I said, in truth I don't know you very well at all.

Nonetheless, you have tried to help us get to know you, as you have been writing, and writing for some time, whether via Twitter or through other publishing platforms.<sup>6</sup> I have read your tweets, your longer pieces for *The Guardian* and your poems as rejoinders to the attempts of various institutions and individuals to dehumanize you or to rationalize you out of existence.<sup>7</sup> However, your manifesto takes another significant step, as I read it, in boldly challenging the logic, the rhetoric and the discourses constituting our humanitarian practices in Australia and in the west more broadly, which have been

operating for some time now.<sup>8</sup> Even though your situation, and that of your fellow refugees, is not, in Australia at least, widely understood as demanding a humanitarian response, blurred as it is by mischievous challenges to the legitimacy of your claims to protection,<sup>9</sup> you make an extended, critical and performative intervention into this territory by rearticulating humanitarianism as an ethical encounter and social practice, rather than as an expedient, instrumentalist strategy. And what is also striking to me is that your manifesto<sup>10</sup> makes this intervention in a different (poetic) voice, a subjective voice that recasts language as offering rather than missile, and as solidary rather than self-serving. That is to say, as a refugee and long-term prisoner on Manus Island, your writing voice, your agency and your suffering dramatize a profound commitment to responsibility for the other, to the ethics of care: to human (and animal) interdependence, to

Feelings of friendship.  
 Feelings of compassion.  
 Feelings of companionship.  
 Feelings of justice.  
 And feelings of love.

In this way, then, in your manifesto you manage to do (at least) two very important things: you disrupt the contemporary discourse of humanitarianism and the neoliberal foundations on which it largely depends;<sup>11</sup> and you achieve this disruption on altered grounds, as your voice, your agency and your use of language (as insistently social) enact your subjectivity and your humanity.

Before exploring these ideas further, though, can I just say that your words touched me deeply, in particular your assertion of the primacy of love, and its refrain through the manifesto. Love! I'd heard about it two days before your letter was published. It was 7 December 2017 and the Australian Government was in carnival mood: celebrating love. What a day for love, Mr Turnbull said, in a Parliament that seemed briefly to forget itself and its habitual mode of doing politics. MPs from all sides of the House cheered and cried and clapped and hugged each other; and they sang 'We are one and we are many'. Everyone was smiling and it felt spectacularly good, for those MPs and for those of us watching too. And it was indeed an historic day when the same-sex marriage bill was passed in Australia by an overwhelming majority.<sup>12</sup>

As I mentioned, you too talk about love in your letter. You use the language that is (7 December excepted) largely taboo in our public discussions about others, whether gay, poor, unemployed or refugee, for example. But for people in your situation or, I should say, for people in our situation, your talk of love – which, as you use it, suggests an imaginative openness to and embrace of the other – is particularly risky, even radical. So while our acceptance of homosexual love has now been legally and (broadly) culturally sanctioned, through the passing of the same-sex marriage bill, there are still certain kinds of love that are out of bounds, delegitimized or regarded as politically and economically reckless: in fact, un-Australian. A case in point: the trolls on Twitter respond to your assertions about love, humanity and care with what cannot be described as anything other than hate and venom.<sup>13</sup> But it's perhaps even worse than that. For now, it seems, that a vituperative rhetoric, one boasting its volume, strike and reach and gleeful in its muting of other voices may more readily raise the public's cheers than their hackles (or heckles). Thus, some of us find it quite acceptable to denigrate asylum seekers and refugees, people like you. We don't flinch when Mr Dutton, Minister for Home Affairs, says of asylum seekers held in offshore detention: 'Some people have even gone to the extent of self-harming, and people have self-immolated in an effort to get to Australia.'<sup>14</sup> Or, of those refugees departing Australia having been accepted for settlement in the USA:

There are a lot of people that haven't come out of war-ravaged areas, they're economic refugees – they got on a boat, paid a people smuggler a lot of money ... Somebody once said to me that the world's biggest collection of Armani jeans and handbags [is] up on Nauru waiting for people to collect when they depart.<sup>15</sup>

Dutton's comments illustrate how the scripts of a powerful state figure, which insistently rehearse the alleged scheming of suspect (albeit non-specific) others, become established as a form of colloquial indictment; such commentary about marginalised others is now commonplace in Australian government rhetoric.

Therefore, I have wondered at your courage and your patience in continuing to write about what you witness, knowing that these days such writing, from a position of precarity, is not for the faint-hearted. The manifesto, in which you communicate your 'humanitarian message to Australian society and beyond', tells of the three weeks (23 days, to be exact), from 31 October to 23 November 2017, during which you and your 600 fellow prisoners staged a protest against your continued imprisonment on Manus island, a protest against the Australian Government's attempts to transfer you to one of three new 'transit centres' on Manus, a place where you feel unsafe and unwanted, rather than expedite your resettlement in a third country. Paradoxically, the closure of Delta prison presented you with a cruel parody of freedom, as the gates were opened and the security personnel departed. In response, you chose to exercise a real freedom: freedom in the practice of collective resistance.

The refugees have established that they desire to exist only as free individuals. They desire only an honourable existence. They have established this in confrontation with the proliferation of violence in the detention centre, one that is implemented by a mighty power structure. Up against the determination of this monolith, the refugees have, ultimately, vindicated themselves.

Because you refused to leave on 31 October, the Government stopped supplies of water, food and medicine to the facility (though friends and supporters managed to smuggle in supplies over the next three weeks). You describe how you persevered during this period by relying on one another and by staying 'true to the principles of love, friendship and brotherhood'. Indeed, you write of the close collaboration between the refugees themselves and between the refugees and supporters outside Delta prison, including Manusians and specific groups in Australia, with whom you formed 'an important partnership'; and who staged protests on Manus and in different Australian cities in support of your struggle. Your manifesto goes on to describe 'the messages' you tried to convey by your three-week staging of a peaceful resistance, which, as you make clear, is expressly carried out in contradistinction to the violence inflicted on the refugees in Manus prison over the period of your incarceration. In so doing, you confidently affirm 'the personhood', which we have (both deliberately and indirectly) repeatedly denied you, while you also make clear that such personhood entails a relationship with others: not only human, but animal and environmental too.<sup>16</sup>

All this violence designed in government spaces and targeted against us has driven our lives towards nature.  
towards the natural environment,  
towards the animal world,  
towards the ecosystem.

In the manifesto, you challenge us to pause, reflect on and reconsider our stance on humanitarianism and on the refugee; on how we understand the *human* in *humanity* and respond to the call to *solidarity* from one another, and in particular human beings in extreme vulnerability; why we respond as we do; and how we might do so differently: in ways that motivate what you call 'feelings of justice'. You are also forthright, as you remind 'a majority of the Australian public' that although 'they have only ever imagined that their democracy and freedom has [*sic*] been created on the basis of principles of humanity', this is not borne out in their treatment of refugees. And, consequently, 'our resistance is the spirit that haunts Australia'. Clearly, therefore, you are under no illusions that writing against the grain means writing into an overwhelmingly hostile space, in which refugees like you, who have been compelled to flee your homes and who have arrived by boat, are considered by the government and by many people of this country as unworthy, as inauthentic, as not in need of our measured benevolence and calculable support (for this is how we typically and efficiently understand our role as humanitarians), let alone our loving embrace. You write knowing that you are regarded suspiciously by those who think you are up to no good, who scorn your desire for refuge as unjustified, who believe you are untrustworthy and even criminal.

Perhaps we should pause here, briefly, to consider how it has come to this. A concerted and exorbitantly costly effort has been expended, over nearly two decades now, through various discursive means – government, media, legal and policy – to help shape citizens' understanding of and responses to asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>17</sup> These include our suspicions of the vulnerable other and our reactive protection of ourselves and our own; our hyper-alertness to threats of global terror, and the consequent

'border militarisation and securitisation', as you put it, designed to ward off such threats; and our hunkering down and inwards to hold on fiercely to what (material goods) we've got. Moreover, the censoring of media coverage of the incarceration of refugees offshore, the restrictions imposed on medical professionals from disclosing their experience of visiting the camps and treating refugees, and the prohibiting of employees and former employees of the contractors charged with running the camps from discussing what they have witnessed have all served to produce refugees as shadowy faceless figures, quantitative not qualitative, onto which we may cast our own fears and insecurities. Concomitantly, our national borders have been strengthened as they increasingly serve as the point of risk calculation for the negative difference between you and us.<sup>18</sup>

In this climate in Australia, then, our political leaders – and we – too frequently indulge in unabashed relishing of the abject powerlessness of refugees, particularly since you have been held up (even in your forced invisibility) as the very symbols and objects of deterrence. You and your fellow refugees are treated as legitimate targets of humiliation. You are goaded, not only by Twitter trolls, whose wanton verbal abuse and relentlessly outrageous othering is a symptomatic and shameful magnification of the effects of consecutive Australian governments' agenda-setting, but also by populist political and media elites, including so-called shock-jocks and high-profile commentators, with a ready base of public support via mainstream and social media platforms.<sup>19</sup> So pervasive and insistent are these voices that even the patient advocacy in support of you by prominent individuals and institutions, including the church, business, government, law, medicine and the arts struggles to gain rhetorical traction in the maelstrom.

Our immunity to flinching, even when we hear or watch the terrible things that you and your friends have endured or witnessed, and captured on your phones for us to see or to read, reminds me of Franz Kafka's short story, 'Description of a Struggle'.<sup>20</sup> Have you read it? It's a nightmare-like narrative, in which the characters witness violence or do violence to one another as if it is completely ordinary, natural or obvious. The characters are indifferent to one another, or speak at one another without ever conversing with one another. They also fail to name their experiences of the world for what they are.<sup>21</sup>

In the same way, our capacity to imagine our interdependence with you and our part in your plight has therefore been progressively obscured. If we are honest, this obscurity also suits us because we are made uncomfortable when, as in your manifesto, you trouble our ethically complacent understandings of humanity, and of humanitarianism. You provoke us to see each of them anew.

Take humanity, which folds in two key meanings: the collective of human beings, or humankind, on the one hand, and the extension of compassion in recognition of that shared membership, on the other. Humanity thus describes, in general terms, not only the world's people and what it means to be human, but the at-once ethical and emotional ties that bind us to one another. Through your practices of resistance, in the manifesto's recurrent reference to the refugees as human beings and to your half-naked bodies (bodies not covered in things, but evidently not nothing), you press us to think again about what constitutes the human, to consider it as meaning something other than, to put it crudely, someone who has stuff or status.<sup>22</sup> Thus, you push us to question the very norms by which we have come to make the human intelligible.<sup>23</sup> In your alternative rendering, the human is embodied and relational, in defiance of its neoliberal expression, which reduces the human to an atomistic, essentially economic unit. Similarly, the repeated references to humanity in your letter call up the tensions between such relational and positivist dispositions. However, through your collocation of humanity with the 'principles of love, friendship and brotherhood', you show how the vital meaning of humanity is effectively instantiated in its socially situated enactment, in concert with others.

And take humanitarianism. So often, our humanitarian energies are directed to satisfying ourselves, as we offer financial support to causes or campaigns that will, we are told, empower others who are aspiring to be like us. Or we pity those, in far-off places, who stand in imagined orderly queues, waiting patiently (and often forever) to escape misery, fear and trauma. Or we are seen donating to those who (thankfully!) do their suffering in their own (preferably distant) backyards, rather than ungraciously 'trespassing' into ours.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, you transform and render humanitarianism into practices of solidarity and care, as you describe the acts of compassion and protection you extended to the sick refugees and to the dogs

in the camp, as well as to the 'important partnership' that developed between the refugees and your supporters on Manus and in Australia. And during your three-week period of resistance you describe poignantly what emerged from this experience of interdependence:

We learnt that humans have no sanctuary except within other human beings. Humans have no felicitous way to live their lives other than to trust in other humans, and the hearts of other humans, and the warmth within the hearts of other humans.

You show us how our vulnerability (the vulnerability of all of us) need not mean passivity or victimhood but, rather, how it actually animates our humanity and what it means to be human. In so doing, you also proffer an alternative way of understanding humanitarianism and our relationship as human beings to others. And you urge us to think again about the particular bonds and connections that constitute the very foundation, purpose and ethical texture of our lives, the private and public relationships that those different ties enable and the experiences they make meaningful. Oddly enough, this is now an extraordinary way of thinking, especially since a successful contemporary life in the west is generally promoted as one predicated on individual autonomy, on individualism, on competition and on economic 'improvement'. This renders largely invisible and worthless the interdependence which, as you describe, not only nourishes us deeply and gives us joy but is also our lifeblood. From the way you convey this, you encourage me to remember that this is true not only for the survival of refugees, but of us all.

Similarly, throughout your manifesto, by refocussing our business-as-usual perspective on vulnerable people, as you transform the refugee into an individual human subject and agent, you manage to make the obvious strange again. You also challenge us to see and understand things otherwise, or to question what has become (culturally validated as) ordinary. As we have seen, for example, you undercut our ordinary use and understanding of the terms and practices of humanity and humanitarianism, and you invoke love as the basis for forging ties of solidarity and friendship. In so doing, you overturn our now all-too ordinary expressions of indifference, ill-will and even enmity for the refugees whom the government holds in detention.

These are powerful acts of resistance and, as you say, they usher in 'a kind of political poetics' and 'a particular style of poetic resistance'. What is the poetic, after all, if not a making strange (calling into ethical question) and imaginative and emotional transformation of the vernacular?<sup>25</sup> Moreover, this is you, *your* voice speaking and writing to us. Not a celebrity advocate, standing between you and us, and speaking on your behalf. Not a sophisticated, slick social media campaign, at once dazzling and disfiguring, disturbing and comforting in its manicured design, its familiar language and register. And not a government spokesperson whose, as you put it, 'ridiculous fabrications' aim to reinforce your alleged undeserving otherness. Your voice in the manifesto both undercuts and throws into relief all such as those.

You move through different voices in the manifesto – shifting from the *they*<sup>26</sup> through to the *I* and the *We*. In these different positions, you demonstrate for us not only how practised you are in speaking and being spoken about in the third-person, whether singular or plural,<sup>27</sup> but also how the first-person voice humanizes you. Actually, you favour the *we*, as you talk of solidarity, of camaraderie – the *we* that pulls you and your fellow prisoners together. By turning *them* into *we* and *I*, you have offered us a gift: the chance to listen to you,<sup>28</sup> to respond to you.

We can also see this transformation in powerful passages such as the following, when you write about the ways in which

the detention regime wanted to manufacture a particular kind of refugee with a particular kind of response. However, the refugees were able to regain their identity, regain their rights, regain their dignity. In fact, what has occurred is essentially a new form of identification, which asserts that we are human beings.

Here, you show the construction of the figure of the refugee, as stereotype, by 'the detention regime'. You then counter this positioning as other by using a third-person voice<sup>29</sup> to affirm and present to us the reality of refugees as embodied and collectively active subjects in the world, as you tell how 'the refugees were able to regain their identity, regain their rights, regain their dignity'. And finally, you voice

your collective agency as speaking subjects, when you affirm, in the first-person plural voice, that 'we are human beings'.

As well, and as you go on to explain, you and your fellow refugees never gave up 'to become mere bodies subject to politics', but claimed bodies asserting a different kind of politics – 'a kind of political poetics'. In other words, you perform a resistance to the attempts of formidable state and populist forces to elide your humanity, to reduce it to the status of 'mere bodies'.<sup>30</sup> Where other refugees, through hunger strikes or lip-sewing, have protested the state's dehumanising control of the refugee,<sup>31</sup> you have turned to writing as a radical political and ethical move,<sup>32</sup> reminding us, the Australian public, 'what it has lost or what it is in the process of losing': our belief in our own plural humanity. In defiance of this imminent loss, you declare that the refugees on Manus 'have been able to reconfigure the images of themselves as passive actors and weak subjects into active agents and fierce resisters'.<sup>33</sup> It seems to me that through your manifesto, you strive – audaciously, some would have it – to document, make visible and intelligible not only a different voice but also a different language, by reinscribing the refugee as both relational, writing subject and as resisting, embodied agent. In your every utterance, and in the vivid depiction of the refugee as vital and interdependent human being, you thereby unsettle the borders that the Australian government spends so much money on trying to maintain between us, between you and me, I mean.<sup>34</sup>

I referred above to what some may consider your audaciousness at your refreshingly categorical and declarative (rather than submissive and deferential) style in the manifesto. You seem proud of the way in which your resistance has enabled 'the refugees to refashion the image of themselves' in order that you 'now present the real face of refugees for a democratic Australia to discern'. Nonetheless, your awareness of the precarity of your position, as you offer 'poetic resistance' to 'the real politics of the day' is acute:

Refugees pushed back  
 Risking their lives and bodies  
 Just fragile humans risking everything.  
 Risking everything that is beautiful.

Your letter of resistance from Manus Island, impassioned and considered, cuts through the abstract tangle of dog-whistle or, increasingly, vindictive rhetoric, which many of our narratives, commentaries and debates have become. In response to such texts, the poetry you speak of, and the poetry you speak, seems to offer some hope or even 'Possibility', as the poet Emily Dickinson suggests, when favourably comparing poetry to prose.<sup>35</sup> You instantiate another mode of writing and speaking by puncturing what has, even in its brazen efforts to defile you, now become banal. You speak to us directly in an alternative register, so that we can stop, read and listen carefully, and perhaps learn to respond and relate to you otherwise.

From your letter, I understand completely why you wouldn't want to be 'like us'. Instead, you have asked me – asked us – to be different, and to consider the possibilities of writing and speaking differently.

Thank you so much for writing, Behrouz. I hope to hear from you again very soon.

## Notes

1. Boochani (2017a).
2. On the same day that 'A Letter from Manus Island' was published in *The Saturday Paper*, writer and slam poet Maxine Beneba Clarke performed the manifesto at the Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne (<https://soundcloud.com/the-saturday-paper/a-letter-from-manus-island>).
3. The echo with Carol Gilligan's now-classic (1982) text *In a Different Voice*, in which the idea of 'the ethic of care' is first developed, is intended. In her influential work, Gilligan proposes the gendered difference between the respective voices of 'justice' and of 'care'. Over subsequent decades, this work has given rise to significant and sophisticated developments in feminist care ethics, in which the responsibilities for and practices of care are understood as central to human life, in both private and public spheres, and in cultural, social and political domains.
4. The focus of my response to Boochani's letter is also inspired by the incisive work of Lillie Chouliaraki, particularly in *The Ironic Spectator* (2013). Chouliaraki analyses practices of humanitarianism and, as she calls its contemporary manifestation, post-humanitarianism. She traces the institutional, political and technological changes that have together instrumentalized the aid and development 'market', so that rather than orienting ourselves to the suffering

of vulnerable others and to taking action on their behalf, we are now motivated to engage in humanitarian practices for consumerist and self-serving ends. I am interested in what happens when the suffering subject, in this case Behrouz Boochani, himself directly challenges the norms, hierarchies and relationships that constitute contemporary humanitarian practice.

5. In 2001, John Howard's Liberal–National Coalition Government launched the policy of offshore processing (the Pacific Solution) in an attempt to stop asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australia. In 1992, the Paul Keating (Labor) Government introduced the policy of mandatory detention for people arriving in Australia without a valid visa. Subsequent governments have variously developed and extended these policies, so that today anyone attempting to arrive by boat will not only be held and processed offshore, but will never be allowed to settle in Australia. For an overview of the history and current practices relating to Australia's treatment of asylum seekers arriving by boat, see McAdam and Chong (2014); Australian Human Rights Commission (2017).
6. For an account of Boochani's use of social media as journalist and witness, see Rae, Holman, and Nethery (2017).
7. See Boochani's Twitter account: @BehrouzBoochani. Boochani has also written a number of articles that have been published by *The Guardian* since early 2016. See, for example, Boochani (2016a, 2017b, 2017c). For a sample of Boochani's poetry, see Boochani (2016b).
8. See, for example, Chouliaraki (2013); Kurasawa (2013); Little and Vaughan-Williams (2017).
9. To seek protection as an asylum seeker is not illegal, 'but rather the right of every individual under international law' (McAdam and Chong 2014, 52).
10. The word *manifesto* comes from the Latin, *manifestare*, meaning 'to make public'; and from *manifestus*, meaning 'obvious'.
11. In this paper, I understand neoliberalism as a 'distinctive form of reason' (Brown 2015, 35), which has progressively effected 'the disenchantment of politics by economics' (Davies 2014, 4). Under neoliberalism, the human subject is instrumentalized, normatively understood as *homo economicus*, a rational and competitive market actor; and all domains (social, governmental, private and public) are reconceived as markets (Brown 2015, 35–45).
12. See Parliament of Australia (2018).
13. See tweets in response to Boochani's tweet about 'A Letter from Manus Island' (@BehrouzBoochani, December 8 2017).
14. McIlroy (2016).
15. Koziol (2017).
16. For a related discussion on dispossession and 'the differential allocation of humanness: the perpetually shifting and variably positioned boundary between those who are rendered properly human and those who are not, those who are entitled to a long life and those relegated to slow death', see Butler and Athanasiou (2013, 31–32; see also 32–37).
17. For a sample of critical perspectives see Hodge (2015); McAdam (2013); Surma (2016).
18. See the website of the Australian Border Force for an account of the state border as the site of risk calculation (<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/australian-border-force-abf>).
19. Prominent Australian commentators who regularly feature the 'problem' of asylum seekers and refugees held in detention include Sydney Radio 2 GB's Ray Hadley ('The Ray Hadley Morning Show': <https://www.2gb.com/show/ray-hadley-morning-show/>); Alan Jones ('The Alan Jones Breakfast Show': <https://www.2gb.com/show/the-alan-jones-breakfast-show/>); and Andrew Bolt ('Andrew Bolt Blog' for the *Herald Sun*, Melbourne's biggest circulation print and digital daily: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/blogs/andrew-bolt>).
20. Kafka ([1912] 1971).
21. Butler offers an incisive reading of this story, pointing out how it exposes the 'very gap between what has become ordinary and the destructive aims it covers over and conveys'. In so doing, the text also propels the reader 'into ethical responsiveness and alert' (2014, 26).
22. Compare Athanasiou's discussion of the conventional ways in which the category of the 'proper' human is differentially allocated, and 'its presumed self-evidence as a predicate to a man with property and propriety' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 32).
23. Butler claims that 'the term and the practice of 'civilization' work to produce the human differentially by offering a culturally limited norm for what the human is supposed to be. It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a 'Western' civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human' (2006, 91).
24. See also Chouliaraki 2013, 58–60).
25. In other words, poetry's disruption of conventional language (whether through its voice, graphics, grammar, word use, rhythm or rhyme, for example) both takes the reader aback (distances her) *and* takes her in (brings her close) to the richness, precision and ambivalence of poetic meaning. The distancing provides a critical space for working out how language works, and how and what the voice that utters it might mean. The bringing close enacts the communicative, social and interactive potential of language, as we capture and are captured by the meanings it evokes.
26. However, and as I show below, the use of the third-person voice does not necessarily relegate a subject to otherness.

27. See Chouliaraki and Zaborowski's (2017) discussion of the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, and how refugees 'speak' in the news.
28. See Fiona Robinson's (2011) critique, from a feminist ethics of care perspective, of the notion of ethics as a dialogue between human beings as equals.
29. Thus, as stated above, the third-person voice does not always relegate a subject to otherness but, as here, may be used to declare, performatively, their real, material existence for recognition by others.
30. This idea resonates with Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life': human life understood in terms only of its biological dimension, rather than in terms of how it is lived – its social and political potential or possibility. Agamben argues that Western politics is built and thus depends on the exclusion of biological life from politics: 'in Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men' (1998, 7). However, as Boochani shows, a bare life, consisting in 'mere bodies', must be refused by the refugees in order that they may formulate an alternative politics of resistance.
31. Patricia Owens notes that these acts of protest consist in 'a re-enactment of sovereign power's production of bare life on the body of the refugee' (Owens 2009, 573). However, note that Owens (drawing on Hannah Arendt to critique Agamben's position) also argues that an act of protest, such as lip sewing, 'can form the basis of a new politics if it is acted upon and talked about over and over again; if, in other words, bare life is repudiated and a new worldly community is formed around resistance to injustice' (Owens 2009, 577–78).
32. Athanasiou claims that 'in the domain of dispossession, ethics and politics are not (or should not be) mutually exclusive' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 108).
33. Rancière remarks that political activity 'makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise' (1999, 30).
34. The Australian Border Force represents a very specific understanding of the border as a commercial and competitive space and therefore, as suggested above, a space of risk: 'Our mission is to protect our border and manage the movement of people and goods across it and, by doing so, we aim to make Australia safer and more prosperous'. See <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/australian-border-force-abf/protecting>.
35. Emily Dickinson, 'I dwell in Possibility' (466). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52197/i-dwell-in-possibility-466>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Anne Surma* is an associate professor in the School of Arts at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Her research explores the imaginative and ethical uses of discourse and rhetoric in public and professional communications. This interest is variously reflected in Anne's journal articles and chapters in edited collections, as well as in her two sole-authored books, *Public and professional writing: Ethics, imagination and rhetoric* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and *Imagining the cosmopolitan in public and professional writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). She is currently working on a book-length project (with co-author Associate Professor Kristin Demetrious), exploring the ways in which contemporary social issues are shaped by neoliberal discourse and rhetoric.

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