

# ‘Where We Are Is Too Hard’: Refugee Writing and the Australian Border as Literary Interface

BRIGITTA OLUBAS  
University of New South Wales

On the occasion of his arrival in New Zealand in November 2019, after six years spent in the Australian Government-controlled detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, Kurdish–Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani announced: ‘I am Australian. ... I, as a stateless person, will never go to Australia, but I spoke to Australians, I participated in events at universities, I wrote to the Australian people, to share the story of their Manus. I tried to make Australia a better place’ (Doherty). Even before this assertion, his book *No Friend but the Mountains* had been embraced into the canon of Australian Literature by virtue of its passionate embrace by Australian readers, receiving a succession of major literary awards, and entering the best-seller lists. In the year after its publication, Boochani had become a regular guest at literary festivals, appearing via video- or audio-link, participating in the deep literary life of the nation even as he was being held in dire conditions with hundreds of other men, in Manus Prison.<sup>1</sup> Boochani’s status as an Australian writer, then, is fraught and complex, and necessary. It demands of his readers that they engage not simply with his work but with the idea of him as an Australian writer, and with the cognate locution of Australian Literature. This essay aims to take some first steps toward that engagement, to set out some of its imperatives, and to propose some larger aesthetic contexts within which it might be staged. More broadly, it aims to open out the question of refugee and asylum-seeker literature as a compelling and necessary dimension of Australian literature.

My central focus is ‘Chanting of Crickets, Ceremonies of Cruelty: A Mythic Topography of Manus Prison,’ an extract, published in 2017 in *Island* magazine, from Boochani’s 2018 book, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, but I will also examine other writings, including his 2017 manifesto, ‘A Letter From Manus Island’ and his contributions to the 2017 publication: *They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention*, along with contributions by other asylum-seekers to that collection. I have drawn the title of my essay from Boochani’s much-quoted claim in that collection that journalistic language falls short in communicating the plight of the detainees to people outside the camps because ‘Where we are is too hard. I think only in literary language can people understand our life and our condition’ (n.p.). Alongside these writings from the heart of detention, I draw on a number of other writings and artworks to help provide a context for reading these works; most importantly I want to attend to the aesthetic and conceptual frameworks provided by Indigenous writers and artists, and the engagement they make possible with the words and voices, and the bodies, of refugees and asylum-seekers. This essay is at heart speculative and propositional; it begins and ends in a state of apprehension and, indeed, humility, in the face of the scale of Boochani’s achievement as a writer, of the complexities around his arrival and non-arrival into the nation. It recognises the gravity of the situation of the asylum-seekers who are representing themselves, as they begin the exchange with those on the other side of the border, particularly Indigenous Australians. And it follows Boochani’s lead in designating the literary as a domain which might be equal to such a task.

While Boochani’s claim to being ‘an Australian’ is his most audacious proposal—and, in the challenges it poses to imagining nationality and belonging, his most exhilarating—it is

important for his readers also to think through the challenges his work establishes for our understanding of what literature is. In his discussions with translator Omid Tofighian (included in the book's 'Introductory Reflections'), Boochani sets up the idea of the literary dimensions of his work as a dimension of a vast intellectual project of engagement with what he calls 'the phenomenon of Manus Prison.' He observes that the labour of the word is integral to this project: 'Reconstructing voice taught me something special ... both employing and deconstructing writing structures taught me more about the prison' ('No Friend' 533). Boochani sees his project as one that 'will attract every humanities and social science discipline; it will create a new philosophical language' (Quoted in Tofighian, 'No Friend' 4). In this, the project works against the ways that knowledge is being controlled and delimited in the functioning of the border-detention system; as Omid Tofighian comments: 'Manus Prison as an ideology hinders or eliminates opportunities to know; to know in nuanced and multidimensional ways both about the violent atrocities and about the unique lived experiences of the prisoners' ('No Friend' 388). At the same time, Boochani sees the project as at heart fundamentally creative:

The refugees held in Manus Prison have modified their perception and understanding of life, transformed their interpretation of existence.... [T]hey have become distinctly creative humans, they have unprecedented creative capacities. And in my view, this is incredible, it is phenomenal to witness. (Quoted in Tofighian, 'No Friend' 389)

The aesthetic and philosophical reach of Boochani's project, its aim of opening out and transmitting knowledge, is informed by its technological capaciousness: writing and publishing through a range of digital media is central to its form and process, as Tofighian explains:

Behrouz wrote his whole book (and all his journalism and co-directed a film) through messaging. Sometimes he would send me his writing directly via WhatsApp text. But he usually sent long passages of text to Moones Mansoubi, ... another of [his] translators, who arranged the text into PDFs... In some cases, Behrouz would text me new passages later on to add to the chapters, usually for placement at the end. The full draft of each of Behrouz's chapters would appear as a long text message with no paragraph breaks. It was this feature that created a unique and intellectually stimulating space for literary experimentation and shared philosophical activity. ('Translator's Tale' 5)

Here the project of writing posits and makes possible a dialogue across the domains of writing, translating and reading. It also speaks to more familiar understandings of the literary, such as that provided by literary and media theorist Rita Raley, as 'language structured by incongruity, disruption, incommensurability, unpredictability, and complexity,' importantly not based on any 'particular technological substrate'; with 'power to disturb, move, transport' (n.p.). I want to propose, as a starting point for thinking about Boochani's book as a work of literature, that in its grounding in that stream of text messages running from Manus Island to the Australian mainland, it might also draw on Geoffrey Bennington's sense of the 'lived relation' of the telephone, which extends the time of the face-to-face to what Derrida called in his imagined dialogue with Hélène Cixous a 'unique infinity': he wrote, 'we have spoken with each other on the telephone more than alone together—face-to-face, as they say. Infinitely more' (271).

This sense of a mediated 'lived relation' captures the ways that the literature of detainees and asylum seekers directs us to a point of interface, of connectedness; to a praxis that envelops its participants across diverse regimes: institutional, state, political, cultural, linguistic,

technological, aesthetic and personal. Questions of the ‘unique infinity’ of that interface take on an added sharpness in the dehumanising context of refugee detainment—that is to say, in the ways the refugees and asylum seekers are literally deprived of identity. This is one of the most frequent laments in the testimonials in *They Cannot Take the Sky*: for instance Hani Abdile describes refugee processing in the following way: ‘Most of the time, they changed your name into a number—they called you ABC1, ABC2. By the time I finished eleven months, even if you call me Hani all the day, I would never say yes. If you call me my boat number, I would say yes. Or they would call you Detainee, like that is your name’ (n.p.). And the ‘Introduction’ opens with an ‘anecdote’ from Abdul Aziz Muhamat about another detainee: ‘He’d been standing near the gate when a security guard had called someone’s name three or four times. The man was standing nearby but he didn’t reply. Aziz told the guy to call his ID number instead—the man responded immediately. ‘Look, man, no one is pretending here. Why should he pretend?’ Aziz told the guard. ‘We forgot our names’ (n.p.).

The refugee, stripped of a formal identity beyond the carceral system, comes in the course of these writings to figure humanity, as in the repeated appeals to ‘the human being’ in the poetic opening to ‘Chanting of Crickets, Ceremonies of Cruelty:’

The human being is born enduring affliction.  
 The human being lives while enduring affliction.  
 The human being dies by enduring affliction.  
 The human being realises affliction.  
 The human being is cognisant of whatever pertains to affliction.  
 Lamentation  
 Crying out  
 Wailing  
 Weeping.  
 The human being experiences all of these things.  
 The human being has deep knowledge of all of these things. (271)

Here, ‘the human being’ is a measure of suffering; unconfined by and in excess of the detainment regime; an index to the condition of humanity which is under attack in and through the detention regime. The urgency of Boochani’s appeal is anchored by his use of anaphora, or repetition.

Boochani’s manifesto ‘A Letter from Manus Island’ was published online in the *Saturday Paper* in December 2017 after the Australian government was forced by a ruling of the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court to close the detention centre on Manus, moving the detainees on to new and inferior conditions by means of appalling transitional processes (including cutting off essential services to force the move). The manifesto frames the resistance of those remaining on Manus as a formal statement not simply of enduring defiance but also of exchange or interchange with the world beyond both the island and the nation, a current and continuing renegotiation of the Australian borderscape:

What are the conditions and the framework that give rise to a resistance constituted by half-naked men on a remote island known as Manus? And what are the messages that this resistance is attempting to convey?  
 The refugees are overpowered.  
 The refugees have had extraordinary pressure imposed on them.

The refugees have resisted an entire political system; they have stood up to the power of a whole government.  
 From the very beginning right through to the very end, the refugees only used peaceful means to stand up and challenge power.  
 The refugees have asserted their authority.  
 The refugees have claimed power.  
 The refugees were able to reimagine themselves in the face of the detention regime. (n.p.)

Here again, Boochani anchors his appeal in anaphora. The manifesto addresses its audience in the present tense, invoking a shared space of address, and then moves to the past tense (and to a particularly truncated form that in itself suggests text messaging) in order to record formally, to commemorate, the achievements of the detainees in resisting the Australian government and constituting themselves in the face of their decimation through ongoing detention. Framed explicitly as a ‘letter,’ the manifesto speaks to the inevitability, even necessity, of its non-arrival, in Derridean terms.<sup>2</sup> So Boochani’s ‘letter’ also speaks to the detention camp as a site or space of delay—of the non-arrival of the refugees and asylum-seekers into the Australian nation. In this manoeuvre, Boochani’s manifesto recasts the Australian border as a space of meeting the other, in a manner parallel to the debate he wishes to stage around ‘the Manus phenomenon.’

Central to such a debate is of course the response of Indigenous Australians to the Australian government’s policies and practices of border detention and the larger realities of forced migration. Indigenous historian Victoria Grieves proposes a dialogue grounded in ‘accommodation, integrations, true citizenship, and ensuring of human rights and social justice’ (‘Seven Pillars’ 3). She argues that sovereignty can only be achieved by ‘white Australian subjects, migrants and refugees’ through a ‘surrender to the reality of legitimate Indigenous sovereignty,’ and she sets up a compelling torsion around the unstable grounds of legitimacy of arrival when she insists that ‘refugees must be included here in this discussion even though many believe they have no foothold in Australia’ (‘Uluru Statement’), and that Boochani’s ‘Letter From Manus’ must be taken as ‘a foundational document for the development of a new Australian Republic’ (‘Uluru Statement’). The dialogue that is proposed in Grieves’s scholarship was evident in the formal Welcome to Country at the first Australian launch of *No Friend*, in Sydney in August 2018. That evening, the substantial audience listened to Boochani speaking via WhatsApp, sometimes in Farsi, with Omid Tofighian translating, and sometimes in English, and could hear in the background the sounds of Manus Island across the line; most of all the sound of the crickets, conveying the remoteness of Manus, and the distance between the two sites, two sides of the Australian border separated by thousands of impassable kilometres. Across this space was established a connection, a ‘lived relation’ in the conversation between Boochani and the Indigenous Elder, Uncle Vic Simms, from the La Perouse community, who presented the Welcome. Uncle Vic is himself an artist, a musician,<sup>3</sup> and he and Boochani spoke together about their experiences as men displaced from their own lands, about prison and about the importance of art in the self-definition. It was an intimate conversation, which the audience were privileged to witness, with the traditional custodian of the land offering welcome to the refugee who had been cast out by the colonial government.<sup>4</sup>

With these groundings of dialogue around sovereignty and welcome in the face of the legacies of colonial dispossession established by Grieves and Uncle Vic Simms, I will move now to look at a work of visual art that stages a different kind of border crossing. Tracey Moffatt’s Installation for the Australian pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale was the first time the

Australian pavilion had hosted a solo installation by an Indigenous artist, and thus constituted an historic moment in itself. *My Horizon* took the matter of boat arrivals as its graphic and narrative point of departure. I want to focus on three components of *My Horizon*: first, *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, a 2-minute digital video with sound.<sup>5</sup> Moffatt provides detailed commentary on the works in *My Horizon* in an interview from the exhibition catalogue. Her commentary, staged as a mock interview, is not strictly part of the work itself, but provides a crucial perspective, drawing her audiences—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; Australian and non-Australian—together within the dark comedy of the work's vision:

*Tracey Moffatt*: This very old film was shot over two hundred years ago. I found it in a sealed-up vault here at a former Aboriginal Mission right in the centre of Sydney. For my Venice Biennale exhibition I have tried to resurrect and restore this film footage and present it as it may have been presented over two hundred years ago. Thus you see in the Venice Pavilion how the film is projected into an old picture frame, which is how they would have presented it back then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

*Simone Brett*: Tracey, I am surprised at your old film footage find, as I didn't think that film cameras existed in 1788.

*Tracey Moffatt*: Yes, Simone, film cameras did indeed exist in a primitive form. Joseph Banks the botanist aboard Captain Cook's *Endeavour* on the earlier 'discovery visit' to Australia was known to have left the film camera with the local Aboriginal people in Sydney. Banks had used the camera to document the local flora and fauna. He left the camera in Australia as the ship *Endeavour* was too weighed down for the journey back to England. (King 113)

Moffatt goes on to outline pragmatic aspects of the film footage's production:

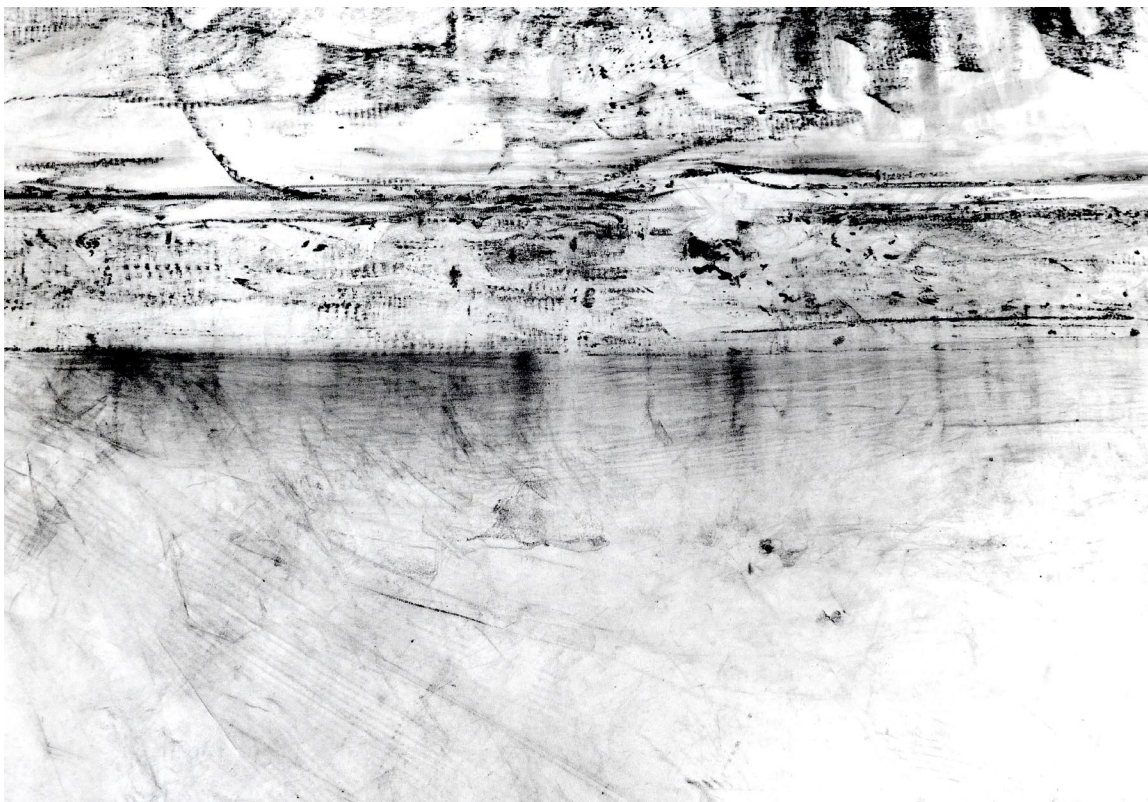
[T]he early film was actually made from animal glue, from melted-down pig hooves. The glue was laid out in thin strips to dry in the sun. Convicts were then forced to puncture the edge of it with tiny files. Some convicts were caught actually using these files to file off their ball and chains that the poor bastards had to walk around in. Once almost dry, the pig-glue strips were then dipped in gunpowder from muskets. The British military were annoyed at first that the Aboriginal people borrowed their guns. Governor Philips, who encouraged creativity and in fact championed the early Australian film industry, asked the British military to be lenient. (140)

She notes that while 'it is hard for me to pinpoint the actual shooting date[. . .]xperts have analysed the footage and the charred nitrate exposure on it indicates a possible date of 26 January 1788' and acknowledges that the date is celebrated as 'Australia Day'; however, she adds the following explanatory note:

[B]ut Aboriginal people see 26 January 1788 as a day of mourning. In fact, you can hear the wailing sounds on the 1788 day of mourning film footage. I can also hear a newborn baby crying. I think the Aboriginal filmmakers may have been trying to tell us that despite the European attempt to destroy them, there is still a continuation of culture with the new births. A moving forward, new thinking, new art, a new magnificence. (113)

*White Ghosts* is accompanied by another 2-minute video work *Vigil*, a classic Moffatt montage of dramatic images of overloaded refugee boats alongside stills of Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant and other actors from Hollywood melodramas, caught in moments of shocked witness. *Vigil* makes the matter of refugee arrivals into the nation explicit while washing these images with frozen moments of intense affective response—at once clichéd and unforgettable. Its satiric force—Moffatt described the work as ‘white people gawking at desperate poor brown people in boats’<sup>6</sup>—doubles down on the forthright comedy of the very premise of *White Ghosts*. A third work, *Passage*, is a sequence in another of Moffatt’s signature styles of staged, stylish colour images, of fictional refugees and people smugglers and cops, glamorous and sexy, waiting in a port, watching the arrival and departure of boats; moments of threat and daring, charged with desire, loss and longing. Like *White Ghosts*, *Passage* bears traces of both truth and fancy in its particulars and all three works are weighted with Moffatt’s characteristic sparky commentary on the defining force of mediation and the intermedial in these images and stories of arrival, departure, transmission and displacement. While the setting of *White Ghosts* is historically precise, imagining an arrival into the nation of Australia (Sydney Heads, and the twinned specificity of Australia Day/Invasion Day), *Passage* refers us not to a verifiable location, but rather to the mythic topos of the port, where the topography of loss and desire trumps the need for or possibility of geographical reference. Germano Celant observes in his catalogue essay for *Passage* that the mother figure in this sequence asks us to speculate on ‘the need to flee in order to survive’ and speaks to ‘something that can be measured in terms of space—the distance between shore and shore—but also of duration and form, often marked by the physical and emotional impositions of the ‘intermediaries’ of order and exploitation’ (81) in the form of the police and people-smuggler figures.

I will come back to Moffatt’s work, but I want first to set alongside it another visual artwork that imagines the arrival of refugee boats into the nation and the landmass of Australia: *Waterline* by white Australian artist Ian Howard.



*FFV at Waterline*. Image courtesy of the artist

Since the early 1970s, Howard has been producing rubbings—or frottages as Max Ernst called such works—of state fixtures and installations, most particularly military machinery and border walls. Perhaps his most iconic works are *Berlin Wall* (1974) held in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, and *Enola Gay* (1975) from the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The focus of these works by Howard is the borderscape itself; not so much the space between coasts that Celant identifies in Moffatt’s images, which Moffatt populates with intermediary, mediated, medial figures, but the literal boundary within which the nation state is imagined, constituted and policed. The political theorist Etienne Balibar argues that ‘border areas—zones, countries, cities—are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the centre [of it],’ and that ‘what is at stake at the border is the definition of the modes of inclusion and exclusion in the ... “public sphere” of bureaucracy and of relations of force but also of communication and cooperation between peoples’ (72). Further, Emily Apter observes that for Balibar, while a border allows a nation state to ‘cling to itself, fetishizing the pretext of protecting its citizenry in a geographical outline and extending this logic to the separation of “pure” identities’ (68); nonetheless it also bears the capacity, in Balibar’s words, to democratize, that is to say, to effect a process whereby ‘a border is understood as a political border, a testing ground of civility among different communities, and a legal limit where protectionism, ethnicity, and the dictates of an economic world system are justly negotiated’ (68). I think it is plain to see, in the recent history of Australian border policy, the fetishised protection of Australian citizens through the logic of a notion of pure identities—in stark contrast to the wholesale de-identification of the asylum seekers, as already noted at the start of this essay—and will set that aside for now as a shameful given. I am more interested in the productive capacities of Balibar’s formulation, the space of negotiation and mediation that is posited here and opened up by means of the delay of Bouchani’s ‘Letter from Manus’ in a move that draws Manus closer to the Australian mainland, that takes up Bouchani’s call for a broad response to the Manus Phenomenon.

I want to make a couple of general points about Ian Howard’s body of work: first and most obviously, the rubbings bear indexical witness to the material fact of brutal historical events and realities, while at the same time evacuating the category of the human agent or the human as agent. Art critic James Gleeson noted that the rubbing process ‘[subtracts] the actual presence of the object and leaves us with a kind of ghost image, a residue which summons up the reality of the object.’ David McDowell observed that ‘the contact’ with the military object in the rubbings, while appearing to ‘disarm it, to render it harmless ... also [contaminates] the impression, transmitting the object’s menace’ into the viewing space, through the indexical charge of the rubbing. In Howard’s increasingly abstracted works, while it’s impossible to say where we are on the globe, nonetheless, the literal impressions in these works preserve an elemental binary of earth and sea. This fanciful coastline recalls the here and there of the border form itself as, in Balibar’s words, ‘an institutional site that can be materialized on the ground and inscribed on the map, where one sovereignty ends and another begins ... [and which coincides] with the universalization of ... the nation state’ (‘Politics’ 89), but also as what Balibar describes as ‘that sensible and supersensible “thing” that should be or not be, be here or there ...’ (‘Politics’ 88).

Howard’s initial plan with *Waterline* was to do a rubbing of an Australian Navy patrol boat and one of a so-called Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel or SIEV, thus imagining a point of connection and collision between the two; a way of imagining the watery ‘ground’ on which Balibar’s ‘institutional site’ of the border might be materialised, at the point of its prospective breaching. In May 2015, Howard visited the Australian Navy headquarters in Darwin, and was granted



access to HMAS Albany, as well as, not a SIEV, but a Foreign Fishing vessel, or FFV, to do rubbings in pigmented wax block on canvas. As Howard explained:

Once passengers and crew are removed, SIEVs are destroyed at sea, so there are none ‘available’ for the rubbing. ... There was a small flotilla ... of FFVs moored in the harbour. I chose this one as the pilot of our Zodiac from the Albany from which the rubbing was conducted remarked on approach: ‘this one is just like the boats we take the people off.’<sup>7</sup>



**HMAS Albany site work (photo Lucienne Fontannaz)**



**Site work of FFV at sea (photo Lucienne Fontannaz)**



The trope of military violence is quite literally present in these images—one of the reasons Howard always includes photographs and video footage of contextual material when he exhibits the work. I mentioned earlier the ghostly effect of the military object being both there and not there in these rubbings. The more substantial ghosting is of course Howard's substitution of this FFV for the SIEV it apparently resembles. The slippage between FFVs and SIEVs has in fact a long history in the Timor Sea, as historian Ruth Balint has outlined: in the early 1970s, Australia declared a 12 nautical mile limit including large areas that traditionally had been fished by Indonesians. These divisions are unrecognised by the Indonesian Rote Island fishermen whom Balint interviewed. They told her: 'The sea is not divided ... [The Australians] say we trespass the border. ... How can we know we've trespassed the border? There are no signs. It's the open sea!' (4). The impounded FFVs speak to the drastically different understandings of a border that is 'written on water,' a border that can literally not imagine the long history of its customary and necessary traversal. Balint also outlines the absurd situation whereby 'traditional' Indonesian fishing is permitted in some areas of the MOU zone so long as the boats are wooden and without motors, that is to say, without the kinds of technological aids that would enable their crews to know when and where they had crossed the border. Further, in its substitution, this particular boat speaks to the fate of the SIEVs, their burning at sea as the violent conclusion of their voyage.

Ian Howard's works effect a shift from the 'terrestrial land mass' of Australia to an altogether less secure place. They stage two very different experiences of witnessing: the HMAS Albany is brought face to face with the individual viewer, even while the finished canvas conveys the full size of the boat; thus the 'menace' of the military object is brought sharply home to viewers. The FFV works rather differently, in that it records the marking of the waterline; that is, when the boat is properly loaded, where the waterline would be. As this particular FFV—and we need to bear in mind that the rubbings work as photographs do, that is to say within the domain of the indexical, to designate the presence at a specific time and place of a very particular object—is without its cargo or crew; it is sitting above the waterline, enabling this rubbing to be made (although there was clearly contact with the sea itself, as Howard explained: 'with wave movement and the two boats rocking usually in different directions, the canvas was going into the water and up to the waterline; things were wet. Hence the pigmented wax's inability to lay down strong colour, instead giving a "watery effect"').<sup>8</sup> So there is a ghostly trace here, 'written' like the poet's name, and the maritime border, 'on water'; an absent presence recorded, a slipping of the boat across the times of the past and the present of its impounding, of carrying and losing its cargo. The changing waterline also marks a spatial shift: having slipped across the maritime border, the foreign fishing vessel has been taken decisively into Australian territory. Recorded here in its displacement—like the delayed arrival of Boochani's manifesto 'letter' and the detention of the asylum-seekers themselves—the FFV itself constitutes the border: 'that sensible and supersensible "thing" that should be or not be, be here or there.'

Returning to Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon* installation, I want to consider the minute attention that Moffatt pays and that she also invites us to pay to the work, to the labour, of art's making. I'm thinking here about the deadpan references to history in *The White Ghosts* interview, drawing attention to the pragmatics of making art: of pigs' trotters as a source of celluloid, and the role played by the military in providing infrastructure as well as material support in the form of gunpowder and prisoners using tiny files to make the sprocket holes that will allow the film to run through the projector. (Indeed it is difficult not to read this aspect of the work in the context of the artist boycott of the 2014 Sydney Biennale in protest against Transfield Holdings, the company responsible for running the detention centres on Manus and Nauru, and also a major sponsor of the Biennale.<sup>9</sup>) This focus on the pragmatics of making art, and of seeing art

as itself contaminated, carrying history's dirt alongside its capacity to resist and reform and begin again is clearly of a part with Moffatt's characteristic tricky and ironic commentary on processes of mediation, on the material and technological forms of crossing, of departures, arrivals and continuities. There is, I propose, a line of connection between Moffatt's focus on the pragmatics of passage and transmission in *My Horizon* and Howard's method of rubbing or frottage. In both we are asked to consider the very literal and tangible presence of the machinery of colonial force and might: Howard's very practice depends on the support—not to mention the permission—of the Australian armed services, just like Moffatt's story of Governor Phillips's support for the early Australian film industry. But those pragmatics are also evident in the work of frottage itself, in Howard's conducting the rubbing, in the real-time standing on a boat and rubbing a piece of wax block across its surfaces. And I want to use that connection to return to the refugee writings, and to trace a further connection between this practice of rubbing, and Boochani's use of poetic anaphora,<sup>10</sup> which is something of a defining trope in his writing.

His use of anaphora in 'Chanting of Crickets' and in his manifesto anchors the shifting rhetorical frames of address and makes explicit the desire to speak *to* a particular audience—those outside the prison who need to understand the truth of the prison. In itself the anaphora constitutes a response to the literary imperative Boochani articulates for refugees to 'reimagine our life and our condition,' and to communicate the truth of their 'human being.' Central to the writing project is the need to imagine and speak to a regime of truth and truth-telling that is itself determined by the violence of the refugees' condition and by the urgency with which they must communicate with the wider polity across the thick space of the Australian border. These works draw on and contribute to a literary tradition which Carolyn Forché has called 'poetry of witness.' The term refers to works which, Forché writes, 'bear the trace of extremity within them, and [which] are, as such, evidence of what occurred.' Forché continues: 'A poem that calls on us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of "accuracy" or "truth to life." It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth' (30). The direct address—apostrophe—made to the Australian public by the testimonios and by Boochani's manifesto and by the poetics of *No Friend but the Mountains* sets its literary truth in train and frames its 'consequences' in an imagined futurity, conjured, as Christos Tsiolkas notes in his Foreword to *They Cannot Take the Sky*, in 'the thrill of a new language and the rush of eloquent storytelling.'

That extremity, the 'rush' and the mobility it instates, is nonetheless always weighted down by the suffering—the torture—of the detainees. In the testimonies, the space of the Australian border is filled with the empty time of unjust confinement. The relative 'safety' of detention is undermined by what Saskia Witteborn has described as 'the condition of living in a temporary state of being that is neither here nor there, neither past nor future' ('Testimonio' 427). If, as Witteborn argues, 'mobility is one of the defining concepts of globalization' ('Constructing' 1142)—then the state of 'arrest' in which the detainees find themselves excises them not simply from the civic space of the nation state, but also from the larger and more necessary global transformations and flows of late modernity. The testimonios tell of the boundless times and spaces traversed by the refugees; journeys brought to a decisive halt in the detainment centres, where every aspect of the refugees' lives is regulated by Australian border policy, a form of what Elizabeth McMahon has identified as the 'bounded materiality' (183) of the island prison.

This is rendered eloquently by Boochani in his 2017 film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, where the endless boredom and inaction of detention is represented by the duration of still shots of the detention centre buildings, and of detainees sitting motionless, smoking. The flows, the

mobility of late modernity are intimated in the chemical spray floating across the doubled fences of the Manus centre, and by the small creatures (butterflies, stray kitten) able to pass through the barriers. These features are attested to by the testimonies in *They Cannot Take the Sky*. Ali Bakhtiarvandi tells us: ‘Every second of refugee centre time is horrible,’ a sentiment echoed by many others, such as Neda, who comments, looking back on the two years she spent on Christmas Island:

There is not much to do while you are in the detention centre. The guards won’t tell you anything about what is going to happen. ... The difference between a prison and the detention centre was its uncertainty. It’s not knowing anything about your future—the stress, anxiety. You don’t know what will happen. (n.p.)

In a recent paper, philosopher Judith Butler considered the legal matter and implications of the increasing normalisation of indefinite detention as a state-sanctioned process. Her focus was on Palestine, but her observations were and are more broadly applicable, and she did include Australia in a list of states that sanction indefinite detention under the rubrics of, as she put it, ‘nationalism and racism.’ Butler’s central argument unpacked the specific deprivations enacted by indefinite detention—not just deprivation of ‘freedom, the freedom of mobility, ... [and] legal rights of redress’ but also ‘depriving the detainee of all knowledge about the reasons for and the duration of the detention itself’ (n.p.). The testimonial comments I have just quoted speak to this, as does the further observation by Ali Bakhtiarvandi that ‘the immigration system in Australia is exactly like the CIA system in America. You cannot find out what they are doing’ (n.p.). Butler demonstrates how this formal state secrecy, the deprivation of information turns detention itself into a form of punishment:

The durational condition of detention is marked by not knowing whether one will come to learn the contents of an allegation, stand in court and have a trial where the rules of evidence are followed, whether there will be a judge who decides the merits of the case, whether something called justice is still available. For when the expected narrative sequence of a legal proceeding fails to unfold, and continues to fail for all the moments of detention, then detention, which is a way of waiting for a legal process, becomes itself a form of punishment, so that punishment precedes the trial that never comes.

The allegation is often unknown, even though its force is perpetually felt. Indefinite detention is the protracted condition of unknowingness and uncertainty in subjection. A problem of narrative time is opened up by the indefinite detention, one that Kafka presciently outlines for us in *The Trial*, a fiction that shows us how legal power and legal violence can structure space and time producing in a deliberate and sustained way an unknowingness about why, and for how long, this affliction will last. Kafka does not write from prison, and yet his fiction builds a narrative perspective on the workings of power precisely through failing to fulfil the narrative expectation that justice will be delivered through law. (n.p.)

The torsions that Butler identifies in the operations of indefinite detention as, properly, a narrative process, throw into high relief the matter of truth itself, as it relates to legal as well as literary practices. She writes:

Fiction can articulate the operations of legal violence if only because legal violence makes a fiction of the justice of the law. But the two senses of fiction are

not the same: one shows the lie, and the other conducts a perspective on the temporal and spatial structures by which that seizure of mind and body takes place, establishing a narrative distance from within that seizure, like an elusive body compressed into words, uncaptured. (n.p.)

Butler here brilliantly delineates a chiasmic tension between on the one hand the literal, literary fiction of Kafka's horrific imagined world and on the other the brutally mendacious representations of the various carceral regimes she is examining, regimes which constitute forms of 'legal violence.' The former instance speaks truth to the brutal power of the latter. The chiasmus is mobilised by the ways that a proper sense of narrative sequence informs both domains: in the former, that is to say, in Kafka's fiction, it provides the vehicle by means of which the larger truth of the novel can be laid out, while in the latter it is the halting or thwarting of narrative seen in the failure of 'the expected narrative sequence of a legal proceeding ... to unfold' that is set in play by the processes of indefinite detention. At the heart of the chiasmus is found what Butler calls 'a time of waiting and a repetition of stasis that is potentially fatal'; this is precisely the narrative and poetic heart of the refugee writings I am considering.

I referred earlier to the opening figure in 'Chanting of Crickets': the human being as a measure of affliction. This figure—the capacity of human being itself to embody affliction—is a figure driven by the temporal violence that Butler outlines. This figure is caught endlessly in the moment before arrival into the nation, when the suspension of the expected narrative sequence of legal process, international law, human justice, makes detention the mode of punishment. The truncated and heavily repetitive lines by Boochani I quoted earlier speak to the arrest of time, to the halting of sequence, the reversion, the stasis of human being as affliction. This is the embodiment of the thwarting of justice, in Butler's terms. The experience is compounded as we read:

My toothache begins to settle. Perhaps when the forces of two forms of affliction, from two separate origins, collide, one has to succumb due to the impact and resistance. Maybe something like this had occurred for me. My toothache is directly connected to interweaving nerves deep within the core of my gums. And my affliction is facing off with the affliction of another just a few metres away—behind the fences—it sounds like hopelessness—my toothache is forced to withdraw. Maybe we share the same feeling of affliction; one and the same substance: the affliction at the root of the moaning, the affliction down there in the depths of my soul. (273)

The speaker poetically confuses and conflates the *physical* pain of his own toothache with the *sounds* of pain from those around him, in a devastating experience of shared humanity (indeed shared affliction). At the same time, in a dark irony, this passage also speaks to the dimensions of detainee isolation, the truth, in fact, of the loss of one's name.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that the processes of testimony demand solitude; that testimony and witnessing are functions of an extremity of isolation:

It is a strange appointment, from which the witness-appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution or representation. ... Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as testimony, the burden of witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary

burden. ‘No one bears witness for the witness,’ writes the poet Paul Celan. To bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude. (3)

(Here again we see the chiasmic structure defining the condition of the afflicted subject, the collapse of narrative movement.) Boochani’s conflation of his own pain with that of those around him speaks to this radical solitude, which is nonetheless a profound communication, ‘at the root of the moaning.’ Boochani demands that we attend to that shared affliction in a manner that recalls Elias Canetti’s observation about reading Kafka’s correspondence: ‘For my part I can only say that these letters have penetrated me like an actual life’ (Quoted in Felman and Laub 2). As Felman and Laub observe of Canetti’s response: ‘Kafka’s correspondence is testimony not simply to the life of Kafka, but to something larger than the life of Kafka’ (2). Here then, in this ‘something larger’ than the truth and the name of the refugee writer, in this ‘unique infinity,’ that Boochani images as a ‘facing off’ of one refugee’s pain against another’s, might be imagined a means to counter the ghosted menace and actualised violence, the thwarted narrative sequence of legal justice, at and around the borderscape.

A final accompaniment to Tracey Moffatt’s *My Horizon*, included in the exhibition catalogue, is ‘Odyssey of the Horizon,’ a brief narrative excursus by Indigenous writer Alexis Wright; a meditation on the scenes captured in Moffatt’s installation. ‘Odyssey’ returns Moffatt’s glossy, oneiric images and her dark, punchy comedy to the terrain of myth. It begins in a future which counterbalances both the deadly weight of the White Ghosts’ arrival and the impounded refugee and fishing boats of Ian Howard’s *Waterline*:

The waves you see will continue to heave and wash away boundaries of imagined borders, and mighty storms of the times will erode and break down the walls we build in our minds to imprison ourselves, just as the barricades erected with steel and barbwire to keep other people out will be broken. (114)

Echoing the incredulity of the Rote Island fishermen, Wright observes: ‘There are no boundaries in the ocean’s currents stirring the waters we have touched for the fish to feel ...’ She asks us to ‘Imagine on the day the white ghost ships arrived, how totally shocked the Darug people would have been to see hundreds of people looking like ghosts leave these ships ...’ (114). Finally, as if in response to Boochani’s invitation to extend and expand engagement with the Manus phenomenon, Wright asks, of the refugees in *Vigil*’s sinking vessels: ‘What were their names? Who were they? It makes you wonder. What were the names of all these people who were once the caretakers of their homelands through eras and epical stories, just as the land was once their caretaker?’ (120).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/australia>

<sup>2</sup> Derrida writes: ‘There would be neither postal service nor any analytic movement if ... a letter always reached its destination’ (345), *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vic\\_Simms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vic_Simms)

<sup>4</sup> A recording of the launch, including some of the conversation can be accessed here:

<https://soundcloud.com/uns-w-arts-social-sciences/uns-w-behrouz-boochani?in=uns-w-arts-social-sciences/sets/uns-writing-seminar-podcasts>

<sup>5</sup> Images of all the works in *My Horizon*, including stills from *And the White Ghosts Sailed In* can be viewed on the Roslyn Oxley9 site: [http://www.roslyn-oxley9.com.au/artists/26/Tracey\\_Moffatt/1771/](http://www.roslyn-oxley9.com.au/artists/26/Tracey_Moffatt/1771/)



<sup>6</sup> Moffatt has been widely quoted on this. See for instance an interview with Joanna Kehan, in *Aperture*, 17 June, 2017: <https://aperture.org/blog/tracey-moffatt/>

<sup>7</sup> Email from Ian Howard 5 December 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Email from Ian Howard 10 December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/biennale-boycott-is-the-latest-in-long-line-of-political-protests-by-artists-20140314-34s0r.html>

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Peter Minter for making this point in response to an earlier version of this essay, presented as a keynote address at the AAALS conference, NYU, April 2018.

## WORKS CITED

- Apter, Emily. 'Introduction' to 'World Borders, Political Borders.' *PMLA* 117.1 (2002): 68–71.
- Balibar, Etienne. 'World Borders, Political Borders.' *PMLA* 117.1 (2002): 71–78.
- . *Politics and the Other Scene*. London and New York: Verso, 2012.
- Balint, Ruth. *Troubled Waters: Borders, Boundaries and Possession in the Timor Sea*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005.
- Bennington, Geoffrey. 'Teleanalysis.' *Paragraph* 36.2 (2013): 270–85.
- Boochani, Behrouz. 'A Letter From Manus Island.' *Saturday Paper* 9–15 Dec, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2017/12/09/letter-manus-island/15127380005617>.
- . *No Friend But The Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison*. Sydney: Picador, 2018.
- Butler, Judith. 'Indefinite Detention.' Unpublished paper presented at MLA Convention, New York, January 2018. Cited with permission.
- Celant, Germano. 'Emigration of Identity.' In Natalie King, ed. *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*. Melbourne, Thames and Hudson, 2017. 78-81.
- Doherty, Ben, 'Behrouz Boochani, brutalised but not beaten by Manus, says simply: "I did my best"' *Guardian* 14 November 2019, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/16/behrouz-boochani-manus-says-simply-i-did-my-best?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb&fbclid=IwAR2CdEP6IFMfuu02oQ7trvZUmIzb3f6K0i9FelIX9yEMBqQISkQPerkEBts](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/16/behrouz-boochani-manus-says-simply-i-did-my-best?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR2CdEP6IFMfuu02oQ7trvZUmIzb3f6K0i9FelIX9yEMBqQISkQPerkEBts)
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Forché, Carolyn. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Gleeson, James. 'A New Breed of Realists.' *Sun Herald*, 3 Feb. 1972.
- Green, Michael and André Dao, eds. *They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories From Detention*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2017. Kindle.
- Grieves, Victoria. 'The Seven Pillars of Aboriginal Exception to the Australian State: Camps, Refugees, Biopolitics and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).' In Baehr, Elisabeth, and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, eds. *'And there'll be NO dancing'. Perspectives on Policies Impacting Indigenous Australians since 2007*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.
- . 'The Uluru Statement and Manus Island: How the settler colonial state of exception compounds race and the necessity for a Republic.' Retrieved from <https://acrawsa.org.au/2017/12/28/the-uluru-statement-and-manus-island-how-the-settler-colonial-state-of-exception-compounds-race-and-the-necessity-of-a-republic-of-australia/>.

- King, Natalie, ed. *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*. Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2017.
- McDowell, David. 'Introduction'. *Intelligences of an Underground Man: Works by Ian Howard*. (Exhibition Catalogue) 1989, np.
- McMahon, Elizabeth. *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*. London & New York: Anthem, 2016.
- Raley, Rita. 'Mobile Media Poetics.' *UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture 2009*. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01x5v98g>.
- Tofighian, Omid. 'Behrouz Boochani and the Manus Prison Narratives: merging translation with philosophical reading.' *Continuum* 32.4 (2018): 532–40.
- . 'A Translator's Tale: A Window to the Mountains.' In Boochani, Behrouz. *No Friend But The Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison*. Sydney: Picador, 2018. 1–24.
- . 'No Friend but the Mountains: Introductory Reflections.' In Boochani, Behrouz. *No Friend But The Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison*. Sydney: Picador, 2018. 385–400.
- Witteborn, Saskia. 'Constructing the Forced Migrant and the Politics of Space and Place-making.' *Journal of Communication* 61 (2011): 1142–60.
- . 'Testimonio and Spaces of Risk.' *Cultural Studies* 26.4: 421–41.
- Wright, Alexis. 'Odyssey of the Horizon.' In King, Natalie, ed. *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*. Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2017. 114–21.