Watching Refugees: A Pacific Theatre of Documentary

GILLIAN WHITLOCK
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

Robert Dixon's studies of international media and 'cultures of the periphery' (Esau cited in Dixon, *Photography* xxiv), *Prosthetic Gods* (2001) and *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity* (2012), map Southern imaginaries in the visual cultures of colonial modernity, introducing a conceptual geography of photography and early cinema that moves beyond the nation to the Pacific, and to stage and screen in the Anglosphere of the Global North. Dixon observes in his case study of Hurley's pseudo-ethnographic travelogues filmed in Papua, *Pearls and Savages* (1921) and *With the Headhunters of Unknown Papua* (1923), that Frank Hurley was a 'master of the new media' and 'modern visuality' (*Early Cinema* 217).[1] Here, as he does so often in his writing on literary and visual cultures, Dixon challenges scales of interpretation calibrated in terms of the nation, mapping distinctive Southern cultural formations in the Pacific that coincided with a period of active promotion by the Australian Territorial administration of a white settler society based on a plantation economy in the colony. These studies of visual culture in colonial modernity transform approaches to cultures of the periphery and turn to alternative conceptual geographies, organised in terms of the network or web, and multi-centred innovations and exchanges (210). They inspire thinking about a Pacific 'theatre' of documentary here in this essay. The concept of multiple and conflicting refugee imaginaries—'complex sets of historical, political, legal and ethical relations that tie all of us—citizens of nation states and citizens of humanity only—together' (Woolley et al. 3)—opens possibilities for thinking in terms of Southern refugee imaginaries, networked beyond the nation and the Pacific region to audiences in the North.

In *Refugee Imaginaries*, a collection of essays that introduce this conceptual geography as a hub of contemporary Humanities research on refugees and mass migration, there is a Southern turn in the essay on *The Messenger*, a prize-winning podcast that features the testimony of Abdul Aziz Muhamat, a Sudanese refugee in indefinite detention on Manus Island, and the response of his addressee, Michael Green, the journalist who bears witness to his testimony in Melbourne (Whitlock and Kennedy).[2] The editing of *The Messenger* podcast reminds us of the contemporaneous global context of forced migration by incorporating news from the North as relayed South in soundbites from nightly bulletins. As Aziz remains detained in April 2016, despite being recognised as a refugee in 2015, we hear that rescuers have 'plucked' over 200 migrants from their dinghies in the Mediterranean; another train carrying refugees pulls into Munich Central Station; and the body of a small boy from Kobani in Syria, Alan Kurdi, has been washed up on the beach in Turkey (*The Messenger* #4). *The Messenger* splices these different yet contemporaneous sites together, and the concept of refugee imaginaries invites us to do likewise: watching and listening to the refugees who bear witness from the camps and address us as Australian citizens; and locating these camps in the wider surge of forced migration globally now. Most importantly, *The Messenger* asserts the presence of a powerful refugee imaginary in the Pacific created by the men in detention on Manus Island, where they 'materialize' the camp, and make themselves visible and audible as political subjects both in Australia and globally despite the punitive restrictions of the Australian Border Force Act (Perera, 'Indefinite Imprisonment' 104).

Dixon was one of a number of Humanities scholars who were quick to respond to the establishment of the Pacific processing centres in 2001.[3] The Introduction to *Prosthetic Gods* concludes with a reference to the Pacific Solution, that connects his study of colonial modernity to the camps in both of Australia's former Pacific colonies, on Manus and Nauru, late that year.[4] Although the White Australia Policy was officially put to rest in the 1970s, he observes, its 'imaginary anatomy' remains, and as continuing crises over boat people, illegal immigrants and detention centres demonstrates, 'the Australian body politic is still subject to frequent bouts of spatial nausea' (22).[5] He returned to this topic the next year, in an article on asylum seekers and Australian citizenship: 'Citizens and Asylum Seekers: Emotional Literacy, Rhetorical Leadership and Human Rights,' a rhetorical analysis of the Children Overboard Affair, focussing on emotional literacy and the ethics of citizenship, on human rights and national sovereignty: 'What obligations do citizens owe to non-citizens?' he asks (12). In a commentary on two instances where the figure of the child features in government rhetoric dehumanising asylum seekers—the trauma of a young Iranian boy in detention, Shayan Bedraie, and fabricated allegations that Iraqi asylum seekers had thrown a number of children overboard when intercepted at sea—Dixon considers an enduring and endemic failure of moral leadership and public rhetoric in Australian public life. He identifies this as 'emotional illiteracy': an inability to respond with compassion to the grief and loss of asylum seekers (in their homelands and, subsequently, in the Australian camps), and a failure to make adequate response to the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, and their claims for recognition.

Now, twenty years later, the question of what obligations Australian citizens owe to non-citizens and Indigenous peoples (in the nation and the Pacific region) remains unresolved and both are fundamental to the ethics and aesthetics of 'watching refugees' in this essay (Keenan 449).[6] Dixon's diagnoses of 'spatial nausea' and 'emotional illiteracy' speak to an enduring malaise in the Australian body politic, and the absence of a rhetorical leadership that strives to form positive and ethical community opinions and aspirations. The legacy of the Children Overboard incident remains, and Dixon's essay is a point of reference in recent studies of its aggressive visual dehumanisation of asylum seekers (Tomsic 65). There is a *distinctly* Antipodean turn here, as this 'Certain Maritime Incident' led to uncaptioned photographs taken by navy personnel being released by the government to the media as evidence that children were thrown overboard by asylum seekers who are inhumane and unworthy of humanitarian concern.[7] The figure of the child is deliberately deployed in the spectacular rhetorics of border control, and this is an enduring feature in the dehumanisation of refugees in the Pacific Solution and, later, Operation Sovereign Borders. Debates on visual culture, refugees, and our right to look has a distinctly Southern context, entangled in issues of citizenship and ethics. This is not a question of responses to distant suffering and apprehension of remote 'grievable life' and its obligation on us. What is required here is an 'ethics of proximity': 'not merely of physical nearness, but of political implication and responsibility' (Szörényi 155). 'Proximity' and 'implication' entail a recognition that we are implicated by way of citizenship in the Pacific Solution, and debates about the ethics of watching refugees and recognition of Indigenous peoples in the region are a feature of this Pacific theatre of documentary.

Documentary film is a focus of Humanities research on refugees that features significantly in the cartography of refugee imaginaries. As a mode that exists at the intersection of fact and narrative fiction, Agnes Woolley argues, documentary is well placed to deal with the complexities of refugee movement, and to offer a renewed 'aesthetics of the border' (150). Turning to both cinema and theatre, she locates the camps on Europe's southern borders as key sites of encounter and intervention, where documentary offers a rich space that interrogates geophysical and discursive border zones. Nevertheless, surveys of refugee films identify

pervasive and generic cinematic and narrative conventions that reduce refugees to victimised stereotypes, and further their dehumanisation. Most particularly, and of concern for a Pacific theatre of documentary, the camp remains the synecdochal image for the refugee experience of persecution, stasis and victimhood (Hron 331). Two documentary films from the camps on Manus and Nauru—Eva Orner's *Chasing Asylum* (2015) and Behrouz Boochani and the Arash Kamali Sarvestani's *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017), the focus of this essay—were filmed clandestinely. Both engage with the same historical moment in Australian border politics—the period following the re-establishment of the camps in 2013, and the military-led border security strategy 'Operation Sovereign Borders.' *Chasing Asylum* is an expositional documentary that draws on the testimony of whistleblowers to document the experiences of the men, women and children in detention on Nauru. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* is a poetic, performative documentary immersed in the slow violence of time and the traditions of Persian art house cinema, filmed on the smartphone of co-producer and detainee Behrouz Boochani.[8] These films featured in community screenings associated with asylum seeker advocacy nationally, and in a transnational seasonal network of human rights film festivals at a time when there was a sense of urgency about representations of refugees in the mass media. *Chasing Asylum* premiered at the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival in Melbourne and the HotDocs festival in Canada in May 2016, where its director Eva Orner was a featured guest. *Chauka* was promoted internationally, released in May 2017 and selected for a series of prestigious documentary and human rights festivals, events which are recorded on Behrouz Boochani's Facebook page. The delayed release of the film on Vimeo in May 2018 was timed to take full advantage of this annual film festival circuit. At the BFI London Film Festival in 2017, *Chauka* featured as a highlight, and was acknowledged as a unique component of the year in film by BFI festival director Clare Stewart: 'You have to be sensitive to the year in film, and something has emerged this year in films around social division and immigration . . .' (Clarke n.p.). Events like the BFI are a vital part of an infrastructure that is 'sensitive' to the urgency of campaigns for human rights and humanitarian activism, and Boochani's request to attend in person became a feature of the event when his request for a visa to travel to the UK from Manus was refused.

These Pacific documentaries found a receptive audience transnationally in a global visual culture following a surge of mass migration. Given its commitment to media witnessing, it is no surprise that the infrastructure of Human Rights Cinema responded rapidly to that sense of 'very real urgency to the refugee experience now' that Stewart observes following the mass Mediterranean migrations of 2015. The Charter of Human Rights Cinema focusses on 'moving pictures' that are committed to the 'truthful depiction of human suffering,' to forceful and convincing testimonies of human rights violations and ideals, 'to allowing silenced and marginalised voices to be heard, as a contribution to their empowerment.'[9] This Charter defines human rights films as 'films that reflect, inform on and provide understanding of the actual state of past and present human rights violations, or visions and aspirations concerning ways to redress those violations.'[10] It requires a commitment to the truthful depiction of the reality of human rights violations, and a specific focus on the violation of civil and political freedoms. Given this, there is a strong preference for Testimonial Documentary that bears witness to the abuse of human rights and locates the spectator as witness to authentic and truthful accounts, told in the first person—by whistleblowers, asylum seekers, and islanders in the case of these Pacific documentaries. Both *Chauka* and *Chasing Asylum* deploy rhetorical conventions associated with truthfulness in documentary film: 'testimonies of survivors bear witness to the camp in the first person, interviews with professionals authenticate these camps, and embedded witnesses present visible authentic evidence' (Tacson cited in Collins 69), although *Chauka* also calls into question these rhetorical conventions, the efficacy of media witnessing, and the ethics and aesthetics of expositional documentary.

This international recognition—of significant new productions in Human Rights Cinema at a time when mass migration had become a vital topic—acknowledged the importance of these Pacific documentaries. However these carceral spaces in the Pacific are embedded in offshore worlds that escalate secrecy and invisibility (Urry 17), and they remained silent and invisible not by nature but by force, by the constant renewal of discourses and displays of securitisation and dehumanisation, and legislative regulation.[11] Orner remarks on the 'in/visibility' of asylum seekers in the south (Mountz 185). In September 2015, Australians responded with empathy to the iconic image of a child, Alan Kurdi, on a Turkish beach, 'a great example of the power of photojournalism,' she writes in her memoir *Chasing Asylum. A Filmmaker's Story* (280).[12] Arash Kamali Sarvestani's inspiration was the sight of so many children on boats in the Mediterranean Sea in the mass migration of 2015, that led him to wonder what memories refugee children have about the sea, in the wake of their traumatic experiences (Elphick n.p.). Earlier Sarvestani, who lives and works in the Iranian diaspora in the Netherlands, had attended a workshop in Barcelona, with the Iranian avant-garde director Abbas Kiarostami, on the theme of the sea. Children feature prominently in Kiarostami's films and were a focus in Sarvestani's workshop project. His inspiration was, then, both artistic and political, and triggered by the iconic refugee imaginary of the child in Mediterranean crossings. Sarvestani's first plan was to produce a film on the memories, in their own accounts, of refugee children who crossed the sea, including children detained on Nauru, however proscriptions on media access to the Pacific camp were formidable and families refused permission for their children to appear on camera or provide drawing samples that might feature in a cinematic installation, or supply voice tapes (Elphick, 'Interview' n.p.).

As both Orner and Sarvestani remark, access to images from the camp on Nauru was regulated and vigorously policed. This is a film that was almost impossible to make: 'I know why no one else made the film. You can't get access to the camps' writes Orner in her memoir (285). Constraints on media witnessing imposed by a militarised border control regime are imprinted on pre- and post-production and distribution of *Chasing Asylum*. It was necessary to raise non-government funding given the risk of censorship attached to government funding schemes. Orner turned in the first instance to crowdsourcing, and later to affluent individuals who were willing to take the risk and fund her critique of the offshore detention regime. In July 2015, when they were still filming, the Australian Border Force Act came into effect, further regulating media witnessing from the camps, introducing punitive new laws that place any employee of the government or a government agency who speaks of events on Manus and Nauru at risk of conviction. Even a filmmaker who shares that information or uses secret footage filmed in the camps after July 2015 could be exposed. 'Fortunately for me and the film,' Orner observes, 'I spoke with and filmed whistleblowers prior to the legislation and all footage from the camps was filmed before that date, anonymously' (277).

In *Chasing Asylum* we watch the hands, feet and shadows of whistleblowers who testify at risk of exposure, and the shadows of the asylum seekers in detention. The film is both constrained and enabled by these shifts in policy, as Mark Isaacs—who features in the film—recalls in his memoir *The Undesirables: Inside Nauru* (2014). This account of his five rotations on duty at the camp from October 2012 to June 2013 introduces vital evidence. The revival of offshore detention by the Gillard Government was an outcome of the *Houston Report,* and one of its gestures to humanitarian concern about the welfare of asylum seekers in detention offshore was the recommendation to send care workers to Nauru, and the Salvation Army was contracted to provide these services.[13] Orner's whistleblowers are these Salvos who carry hidden cameras, narrating what they see. They are in turn traumatised by their experiences, bearing witness to

the suffering of indefinite detention and the collateral damage it inflicts on asylum seekers and Australian citizens. A discourse of the beneficiary emerges in Isaacs's memoir: 'I became aware of the uncomfortable itch of compliance, of culpability,' he writes, reflecting on his work as part of this ostensibly humanitarian project. In *Chasing Asylum* '[w]e spoke out together as a collective force . . .' (325).[14] This discourse summons Australian readers to acknowledge a *causal* responsibility for the suffering imposed in their name: it is addressed to beneficiaries of this injustice and cruelty, spoken by a fellow beneficiary (Robbins 7).[15]

As teaching resources online indicate, *Chasing Asylum* has featured in the Australian Secondary Studies curriculum in Year 11 English, cultivating key skills development in Subject English: critical thinking, and positive social action. In an interview with former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, the film returns to recent Australian history, recalling an earlier time when 'boat people' sought refuge in the wake of the Vietnam war, a regional processing centre was established in Malaysia, and refugees were flown to Australia. Two words stand out in Fraser's account of these events: 'obligation' and 'beneficiary.' Australia was, he argues, *obligated* to accept its share of Vietnamese refugees given its role in the Vietnam war, and its role as a significant power in the Asian region. It has, he points out, been a *beneficiary* given what the Vietnamese community has contributed to the nation subsequently. *Chasing Asylum* is dedicated to Fraser. His presence responds to a question about Australian citizenship that Orner asks repeatedly, both in her memoir and implicitly throughout the documentary: 'What have we become?' This question returns to Robert Dixon's essay on emotional literacy, rhetorical leadership, and citizenship. What Fraser and the journalist David Marr bring to the documentary is a *performance* of emotional literacy and rhetorical leadership that, Dixon argues, is absent in Australian public life (Dixon, 'Citizens and Asylum Seekers' 24). The conclusion of *Chauka,* on the other hand, features the 'emotional illiteracy' of (then) Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in response to Behrouz Boochani, broadcast live by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2016.[16]

In her review of the film in June 2016, Anwen Crawford records the affective force on its audience of citizen witnesses:

> *Chasing Asylum* is not a documentary filmed in order to explore cinema as a form. Yet the grainy footage that was filmed secretly in detention centres, at great personal risk, has an eerie, haunting quality . . . It is a difficult documentary to watch. At the screening I attended I wondered if people might applaud at the end in recognition of the risks taken by Orner and her subjects. But instead, as the credits rolled, there was only a deep, ashamed silence. (Crawford 2016)

This returns to that earlier question that haunts Orner: what can documentaries do? After all, they lack the impact of photojournalism, where a single iconic image can have an indelible, enduring impact on global visual culture. We see one response here, a feature of Human Rights Cinema: shaming. Beyond this, as an expositional documentary, *Chasing Asylum* also gathers and archives a formidable array of evidence about the camps: interviews with politicians and public intellectuals on policy, with grieving families in Iran and Indonesia who have lost fathers and sons at sea and in detention, and the whistleblowers who capture visible and audible evidence of suffering in the camp. These are essential to its pedagogic functions, to the presentation of evidence that informs public debate and to resource a curriculum that speaks to younger generations about migration, citizenship and belonging.

In a critique of *Chasing Asylum* and 'shaming' audiences, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald questions the ethical contract of an expositional documentary such as this: its access to the camp, and the ways spectators are invited to watch refugees, and respond to images and sounds that attempt to communicate complex and traumatic refugee stories of dispossession and displacement. How might it be possible to render the experiences of refugees, and particularly their subjection to state-sponsored abuse, in ways that are both ethically defensible and aesthetically compelling?

> . . . the detainees come across as victims rather than agents, their existence narrowed down to protracted and embodied experiences of rejection and shame. Their bodies become the canvas of their despair. They are present . . . only in the form of remediated snapshots and off-camera voices. . . . We, the mainstream audience, do not engage with them face-to-face. We hear their disembodied words, we may weep for them, but we do not meet their gaze. (Hemelryk Donald 74)

The focus of this critique is the visual rhetoric of expository discourse and the limitations of the ethics and aesthetics of expositional documentary. Its hierarchical arrangement of speaking and looking features an authoritative first-person expository agent speaking to an audience positioned as the second person, that is invited to look at the evidence on display—this is well attuned, for example, to the ethical turn in teaching Subject English and the cultivation of 'sensitive' and 'reflective' citizenship (Whitlock,'Bringing Literature to Rights' 169). The visual rhetoric of expositional documentary commonly features in the humanitarian scene, where the status of the speaking subject is reserved for the presenting expert and the responding audience, while the words, image, or even person on show remain silent objects whose meaning is explained by the authoritative voice of the expository agent (Szörényi 155). Hemelryk Donald's critique focuses on the figure of the child in *Chasing Asylum*. The child detainees themselves do not speak. When they appear on camera their faces are obscured to hide their identity, they are the object of the image, and they may or may not realise they are being filmed. 'The space of childhood on Nauru,' she argues, 'is detectable mainly through its agonising thinness, and through the tunnel vision of incarceration' (75).[17]

The child conventionally occupies a privileged place in human rights activism and humanitarian sentiment, protected specifically by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both Orner and Sarvestani were inspired by images of the refugee children in the Mediterranean and, in particular, the iconic image of Alan Kurdi that inspired compassion for refugees and changes in public policy. However here in the south, as Robert Dixon's essay on citizens and asylum seekers points out, a legacy of the Pacific Solution is a specific history of representations of the child and the dehumanisation of asylum seekers, and an enduring 'emotional illiteracy' in the public sphere that Orner confronts by provoking shame in its audience. Alternatively, Hemelryk Donald suggests, the affect-based, non-representational ethic of performative and poetic documentary in *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* draws the spectator into an immersive experience, that engenders not shame but an 'ethics of proximity,' of political implication and responsibility (Szörényi 155).

An early review of *Chauka* by the Australian humanitarian activist Arnold Zable captures the immersive *experience* and affective force of watching this poetic documentary: what he sees, hears, and comes to understand as he watches the film. 'The smart phone camera *roams* through the centre,' he writes, and '*lingers* on scenes of island life and culture'; we *hear* 'the incessant whirring of fans,' 'a haunting Kurdish folksong sung by one of the inmates,' and a birdsong:

the chauka bird, 'a homage to Manus Island culture;' and we *see* startling surreal-like images: 'rows of empty white chairs leaning against the wire through which you can see the unobtainable sea; the exuberant, beautiful faces of Manus Island children, dancing just beyond the wire, images of cats, contrastingly free, at home in any space within and without the wire' (Zable n.p., my emphases). Zable emphasises the unique poetic vision that drives *Chauka*: filmed and directed by two men who are physically distant, who share 'an eye for life's beauty, its injustices, and cruelties,' and allow 'the sounds, the snatches of conversation' to speak for themselves. 'Boochani is at heart an artist, who works intuitively, and instinctually,' he concludes. This is an important distinction: whereas most reviews of *Chauka* recognise the authenticity of a film made clandestinely by a man who suffers the injustice and cruelties of indefinite detention, Zable listens, sees, and recognises the artistry of the documentary. Equally important, he is one of the few reviewers to observe that the mobile phone not only roams the centre, but it lingers and listens and allows the voices of Manus Islanders to be heard: 'The people of the island are stuck in a vicious dilemma, co-opted into the offshore processing system through their desperate need for work. They are on a lower rung in the camp hierarchy, with the Australian government firmly established at the apex' (Zable n.p.).

The diegesis of *Chauka*, with its metafictional device of casting two journalist/actors at work, presents a critique of media witnessing, returning to episodes where it has already 'shone the light' on the Manus camp, to little effect. *Chauka* now carries these testimonies forward performatively, as visible evidence. There is then an element of belatedness in *Chauka* that questions the efficacy of human rights activism and testimonial documentary. A metafictional narrative of two parallel and simultaneous journalistic investigations shapes the documentary. The influence of Persian art house documentary is evident here, in this film co-produced in the Iranian diaspora: a mixture of fiction and documentary, events that took place for real and events staged for the camera: 'there is no meta-position or objective point of view from which to make a judgement: both journalism and the law are shown to be thoroughly theatrical and performative—and yet within this a certain distinction between truth and fiction must nevertheless be found' (Butler 70). The film begins with a voice-over—the activist and writer Janet Galbraith, cast in the role of the Australian journalist, demanding more evidence of experiences in the camp, more documentation, more intimate and authentic detail that is timely and irrefutable: 'We must be strategic . . . we went too early before,' we hear. As 'the refugee journalist' in this metafictional staging of media witnessing, Boochani works within the camp, interviewing detainees to record visual and verbal testimonial evidence of their experiences in the solitary confinement cells known as 'Chauka.' These are men he knows and trusts. He records their accounts of solitary confinement, deprivation of food and water, and physical and verbal abuse in the Chauka cells. We see visible evidence of this abuse on camera—the physical scars, and we hear a first-person witness account of the death of Reza Barati. These testimonial micronarratives are stylised dramatisations that highlight their semiotic status as performance.

Reflecting on the filmmaking process in her role as a (non)actor and witness to the process, Janet Galbraith emphasises that *Chauka* stages a questioning of the privileging of documentary proof and evidence, and her role in the film as a journalist in Australia in pursuit of 'documents' and 'evidence' is in the context of an implicit critique of expositional modes. In *Chauka*, she observes, images and sounds create 'disjunctive spaces' designed to prevent the audience from watching and listening passively to, for example, the low-tech synch soundscape. Viewers are encouraged to practise 'haptic listening,' an embodied attention to voice, and to what remains unsaid. Galbraith's interviews with two Manusian men introduce an Indigenous perspective: on Manusian culture and kinship; on the symbolic importance of the Chauka bird; and on the prison as another stage in an enduring colonial exploitation of the island despite its status as an

independent sovereign nation. Like Arnold Zable, she focuses on the demands of watching *Chauka* not as a shamed and silenced spectator, but with an engaged and embodied response to the politics and poetics of this work of art.

Galbraith's presence in the film, and her role in staging its critique of media witnessing and the inclusion of Indigenous testimony, is representative of her enduring commitment to solidarity with refugees. For example, her 'Writing Through Fences' project cultivates the self-represented witnessing of refugees, and she immediately responded to Behrouz Boochani's early Facebook posts in June 2015 where, as 'bwchany,' he recorded his enduring grief and anger at the death of his friend Reza Barati. His autobiographical novel *No Friend but the Mountains* is dedicated to her.[18] She was one of the founders of the Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites collective (RAPBS), that differentiates itself from an analysis and activism that is animated by an 'uncritical humanitarianism' where 'citizen-advocates play the role of ventriloquists, protectors, defenders and white saviours' (Perera and Pugliese 87). As an alternative strategy of resistance, RAPBS staged a performance (subsequently a film), *Call to Account*, across three Australian cities that 'called out' the Australian government's failure to uphold UN conventions with regard to refugees. This is a 'call to counter-citizenship,' an alliance of citizens and non-citizens that holds the state to account in terms of its own legal obligations and responsibilities to international law. Galbraith's role in *Chauka* is consistent with the *Call to Account* intervention, and citizen advocacy that adopts a strategy of public testimony and accusation, disrupting the politics of pity and denouncing those who are responsible (Lydon 16)

The existence of the secret compound called 'Chauka'—three converted shipping containers several hundred metres from the main accommodation camp that were used for solitary confinement by Wilson Security—was documented in 2014, although it appears on no official maps. Journalists 'shone a spotlight' (Gleeson 216) on the Chauka cells soon after reports began to surface of two men, who were reported to have witnessed the death of Reza Barati and were scheduled to give evidence at the trial, being hidden away in a secret compound where they were beaten and threatened with rape and deportation. *Chauka* does not *reveal* but *returns* to incidents, already reported by journalists, that have been the subject of complaints to the Australian Federal Police, dismissed by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, and reported to the United Nations human rights authorities. Juan Méndez, the UN special rapporteur on torture, concluded that there was 'substance to the allegations' made by detainees on Manus, and that the Australian government, by failing to provide additional details into the investigation of claims, had 'violated their right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment' (Gleeson 217–18). In *Chauka* a meta-fictional staging of testimonial evidence first revealed in 2014 translates testimony into a poetic and performative documentary that demands moral accountability and questions the efficacy of empathy and rights discourse. As Sarvestani observes, the documentary is oriented to the long durée, to history rather than the contemporary politics of detention: 'I knew that most likely we can't change this country . . . They will demolish the camp, say there was nothing there, but now we have a record' (Quinn n.p.).

Boochani is critical of well-meaning 'journalists, human rights defenders and politicians against offshore detention who have unintentionally served the government's purposes in advertising the violence of the Pacific camps and exporting it to the globe' (cited in Lydon 15). As Emma Cox observes, Boochani rejects the normative affective relation of supportive citizen/grateful refugee and the aesthetics and politics of watching refugees in human rights discourse, and he directly challenges the limitations of responses to *Chauka*:

> In his virtual public engagements with audiences and hosting agents (cinemas, theatres, festivals, cultural and educational institutions, prize awarding bodies), he challenges audiences' humanitarian complacencies and his critiques can be unforgiving. At a book launch for *No Friend but the Mountains* at Sydney's University of New South Wales, an event he joined via weblink, Boochani expressed his disappointment that screenings of *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* have invariably been followed by audience questions about the political status quo and various apologetic sentiments, rather than engagement with the artistic or technical elements of the film. Boochani contended that a widespread inability to receive refugees' cultural production as art constitutes a form of colonial thinking. (Cox, 'Island Impasse' n.p.)

In Australia, community screenings of *Chauka* hosted by humanitarian activist organisations actively encouraged this audience response. Nationally, screenings were sponsored by Amnesty and the Refugee Action Coalition, for example. Local activists used screenings of *Chauka* to circulate petitions, raise funds, and organise public demonstrations. Cinema lobbies became hubs for rights activism and humanitarian concern. Theatres and halls were busy with refugee activist groups and materials on display, and during a screening I attended in Brisbane in 2017, it was the exchange between Behrouz Boochani and the (then) Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that features at the end of the film that provoked an audience response, and calls of 'Shame!' This encounter was mediated by current affairs television program *Q&A*, screened by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in June 2016 after the PNG Supreme Court ruled the camp illegal. Prime Minister Turnbull responded to Boochani's moral and ethical critique of mandatory detention with absolutist political rhetoric of 'stop the boats,' the discourse of Operation Borders and its faux humanitarian commitment to saving lives at sea. We hear this conversation as we watch the final scenes of the film, one of the few episodes of violence and self-harm that Boochani filmed in the camp and that Sarvestani included in the final edit of this austere poetic documentary. Ultimately, *Chauka* bears witness to the limitations of testimony and media witnessing in its engagement with punitive policies and practices of border control, and to Turnbull's demonstration of the enduring 'emotional illiteracy' and absence of moral leadership in the body politic that renders moral and ethical critiques of offshoring inaudible and invisible.

Boochani has since expanded on his critique of 'colonial thinking' and the impact of 'humanitarian complacencies' in reception of the film. Our failure to see and to recognise the significance of the figure of the child, the presence of Indigenous people on screen, and the transgressive aesthetic qualities as we watch *Chauka* are indicative. In particular, he focusses on our failure to respond to 'what I consider the most sublime and poetic scene in the film':

> One of the imprisoned refugees puts his feet up on the fence and sings a Kurdish ballad while on the other side of the fence two Manusian children dance to the melody. It is absolutely amazing that on a remote and forlorn island, thousands of kilometres from the Kurdish homeland, a couple of local children from Manus dance to the sound of a Kurdish folksong. More than anything else, this scene reminds me of the creative power of humanity and its ability to transcend borders. ('Film as Folklore')

The film assumes too much, he reflects in retrospect: 'we were unable to create the appropriate interpretive space' and allow spectators to engage with Manusian culture, and to grasp the

depths of Australia's colonial imaginary and its control of borders and bodies in the region. Audiences were unable to 'see' the film as a work of art, and unable to hear and recognise the transgressive aesthetic qualities of the scene involving Manusian children dancing to a Kurdish folksong as a powerful decolonising political act. However, this critique of audience response is not necessarily a failure of the film (as Boochani fears). It raises questions about the distribution of refugee films, the creation of 'appropriate interpretive space' (Khorana 139), and the erudition required to respond affectively to this poetic documentary that draws on Kiarostami's metafictional cinema. Community screenings and the network of Human Rights Cinema that promoted *Chauka*, in Australia and internationally, actively encourage both humanitarian witnessing and 'apologetic sentiments,' as we see from its Charter. Alternatively, watching *Chauka* opens an interpretive space that demands an active and embodied response of spectators, a capacity to move beyond the 'emotional illiteracy' of the Australian body politic that Dixon identifies and recognise the significance of the Indigenous child at this scene, and the children's dance as an embodied response to the Kurdish lament of the refugees.

In October 2020 the interpretive space of watching *Chauka* expanded with the release of a new film by Arash Kamali Sarvestani, *Tall Fences, Taller Trees*, a companion film to *Chauka.* It returns to key elements of that 'most sublime and poetic scene': Boochani leaning against the fence, looking out to sea; the presence of Manusian children; and a haunting soundscape that features Kurdish folksong and lament. This film documents the making of *Chauka*, and accentuates the dynamic partnership of Sarvestani and Boochani, and their North–South dialogue within the Iranian diaspora. Just as paratexts to Boochani's autobiographical novel *No Friend but the Mountains* introduce his partnership with translator Omid Tofighian, *Tall Fences, Taller Trees* expands the documentation of the creative diasporic dialogue that generates *Chauka*. Sarvestani, like Tofighian, is grieving the death of his father, immersed in emotions of grief and mourning that find expression in the collaboration with Boochani. The domesticity of Sarvestani's life in Eindhoven—as a husband, father and brother—is a counterpoint to the grief of the men in the Manus camp separated from their children, wives and parents, an important theme of *Chauka*. As Arnold Zable observes in his perceptive review of the film, the camera also captures sublime moments of play between Sarvestani and his children, a counterpoint to the Indigenous children Boochani observes on Manus. Time is a key theme in both *Chauka* and its companion: the pressure on Sarvestani to find time for filmmaking; the suffering of the men on Manus who are immobilised and suspended in time; the exchange of voice messages between Eindhoven and Manus outside real time (Zable, '*Tall Trees*'). *Tall Fences, Taller Trees* sharpens our senses of watching and listening to the camp. We hear a soundscape that is embedded in the cultural politics of grief and mourning, as with *Chauka*. Sarvestani's brother, the composer and musician Aram Sarvestani, composes a requiem in response to the monologues of the Iranian refugee Hamed Shamshiripour, and the film is dedicated to him. This too is a reminder of Tofighian and the rich intertextuality of Boochani's collaborative arts in literature and film: in the paratexts of *No Friend but the Mountains,* in the 'Translator's Tale,' Tofighian recalls his first meeting with Boochani, at the bus stop in Lorengau town on Manus. 'Behrouz hadn't eaten a thing all day,' he remembers, 'he'd consumed nothing but smokes for breakfast and lunch . . . Earlier that day I learned that the body of refugee Hamed Shamshiripour had just been discovered within a cluster of trees near a school, beaten and with a noose around his neck . . . The circumstances were extremely suspicious. . .' (*No Friend*, xi–xii). *Tall Fences, Taller Trees* is a companion to *Chauka,* and both are components of a larger and ongoing archive of collaborative life narrative in autobiographical writing and documentary film, that includes the two-channel video artwork by Hoda Afshar, *Remain*.

This Pacific theatre of documentary introduces a Southern visual culture to current research on refugee imaginaries and the aesthetics of the border in documentary cinema. Like Boochani's autobiographical novel *No Friend but the Mountains*, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* challenges Australian readers and spectators, as citizens and as implicated subjects (Whitlock, forthcoming). It poses intractable problems of creating an 'appropriate interpretive space for its audience,' and 'draws attention to a complicity many viewers may be uncomfortable accepting' (Elphick, 'Cinematic Poetics' 204).[19] What do citizens owe non-citizens? This question that Robert Dixon poses in his germinal essay on citizens and asylum seekers sets this essay in motion, and it remains critical. His cultural histories of photography and cinema in colonial modernity set the scene for an enduring emotional illiteracy in the long history of Australian colonialism in the region and within the nation. Importantly, Dixon's essay on asylum seekers and citizenship ends with an affirmation: new affective responses and interventions can be cultivated. By moral leadership that uses a language of the beneficiary and asserts the moral obligations of citizenship. By citizen activism that draws on 'counter-citizenship' to hold the state to account in terms of its own legal obligations and responsibilities.[20] By scholarship in the Humanities that cultivates emotional literacy and an interrogation of citizenship and all we can't see.

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NOTES

[1] Dixon engages with popular cinema and ethnographic representation in some detail in both of these books. See, for example, *Photography* pp.165–207 and *Prosthetic Gods* pp. 48-71.

[2] The podcast takes the name of a critical component of the infrastructure that enabled Aziz's digital testimony: Facebook Messenger.

[3] For example, the transdisciplinary *borderlands e-journal* was founded that year, and its manifesto identifies borders as a critical issue for 21st century research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The first issue included Suvendrini Perera's foundational essay, 'What Is a Camp?'

[4] The Pacific Solution is the policy developed by the Howard Coalition government in 2001 to deter people from seeking asylum in Australia by boat. People arriving by boat were either intercepted and turned back at sea, or removed for offshore processing to Nauru or PNG—countries with very little experience of receiving refugees and no proper procedures in place for determining refugee status.

[5] Dixon returns to this issue the next year—see 'Citizens and Asylum Seekers,' a rhetorical analysis of the Children Overboard controversy.

[6] On the impact of the Australian regional processing centres on the Pacific, see the special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific* (32, 2, 2020) that features a dialogue on this issue, in particular articles by Salyer, Keenan, Kanngieser and West.

[7] 'A Certain Maritime Incident' is the name of the Senate Inquiry into the 'children overboard' incident, where an Indonesian vessel was intercepted by HMAS Adelaide off Christmas Island on 23 October 2002.

[8] This draws on Nichols's definitions of documentary modes (Nicols 108–09). Characteristically the expository mode is didactic, treating knowledge as abstract, sound as expressive and cognitive, time and space as discontinuous, and ethical concerns as historically accurate and verifiable; its voice draws on classic oration in pursuit of the truth to inform the audience. In contrast, the poetic mode is affective, sound is expressive and used for pattern and rhythm, time and space are discontinuous and associated with mood, ethical concerns revolve around the use of actual people, places and things, and its voice is characterised by an expressive desire to give new forms and fresh perspectives to the world represented. In these terms, *Chasing Asylum* and *Chauka* deploy very different documentary modes.

[9] The Human Rights Film Network is a partnership of human rights film festivals around the world, founded in 2004. Its Charter promotes exchange, communication and collaboration regarding the representation of human rights issues in moving pictures. See http://www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org/home

[10]This Charter is set out at the Human Rights Film Network site:
http://humanrightsfilmnetwork.org/content/charter

[11] For a comprehensive overview of Australian legislation in this period see Phillips, 'Developments in Australian Refugee Law and Policy' and McAdam and Chong, *Refugee Rights and Policy Wrongs.*

[12] 'We define iconic photographs as those photographic images appearing in print, electronic or digital media that are widely recognised and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres or topics' (Hariman and Lucaites 176).

[13] Angus Houston AC, Prof Michael L'Estrange AO, and Paris Aristotle AM (Expert Panel), 'Report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers.' http://expertpanelonasylumseekers.dpmc.gov.au/report

[14] Robbins defines a discourse of the beneficiary: it identifies a causal responsibility for suffering imposed in their name; it is addressed to beneficiaries of injustice and cruelty; it is spoken by a fellow beneficiary (7).

[15] In response, *All We Can't See: Illustrating the Nauru Files* was created by Arielle Gamble and Daniel New to 'humanise and individualise' the case files from the Nauruan offshore processing centre using artistic expression and the 'immediacy of visual language' rather than reportage. Following an exhibition of works by leading Australian artists, the website enables members of the public to choose a file and submit an artwork in response to it. See https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/237240050/all-we-cant-see-illustrating-the-nauru-files/description

[16] Behrouz Boochani followed up his appearance on *Q&A* with an article in the *Guardian* the following day, challenging (then) Prime Minister Turnbull to respond to the decision of the PNG Supreme Court that the Manus camp was in breach of PNG law and must be disbanded.
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/21/malcolm-turnbull-why-didnt-you-answer-my-question-on-qa-about-manus-island

[17] One of the most powerful exceptions to this regime of border control, *The Nauru Files* is also dependent on secondary witnesses. This cache of 2000 leaked documents detailing assaults and self-harm in the incident reports written by guards, caseworkers and medical officers on Nauru was released by the *Guardian* with an interactive database in 2016. Here too the harm done to these children is documented by secondary witnesses, Australians employed in the camp, and their reports are scarred with redactions that excise children's names and identities.

[18] See Boochani's essay 'Writing towards Freedom,' his tribute to Janet Galbraith and 'Writing Through Fences.'

[19] See Michael Rothberg's recent study of the implicated subject in response to what he argues is an underdeveloped vocabulary for understanding the multiple indirect, structural and collective forms of agency that enable injury and exploitation. This includes a chapter on Kurdish resistance and visual culture and in particular the documentaries by Hito Steyerl, that influenced Boochani and Sarvenstani.

[20] See Galbraith, 'A Reflection on *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*.'

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