



## Refugee Policies and Narratives in the Globalised Era: The case of Australia

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### ABSTRACT

One of the effects of globalisation has been population mobility as a result of famine, climate warming and war conflicts, among other things. This flow of refugees, however, is often seen as a menace to the rule of law and human rights concomitant with the Western lifestyle. Refugees are no longer regarded as human beings and victims, but rather as danger, even as potential terrorists, which has led many governments, including the Australian, to detain them indefinitely in detention centres where they are confined in inhuman conditions. The main aim of this paper will be to describe Australian immigration policies and how contemporary Australian narratives on and by refugees are reflecting this situation, mainly by analysing a selection of texts from three recently published collections, namely, *A Country Too Far* (2013), *They Cannot Take the Sky* (2017) and *Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark* (2017), and Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018).

**KEYWORDS:** Global refugee crisis; Australian immigration policies; Australian refugee narratives; Transmodernity; Cosmopolitisation; Abject cosmopolitanism.

### 1. THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRATION POLICIES

Of all the problems that are haunting today's world, one of them is, without doubt, that of the global refugee crisis resulting from multifarious flows of population. The total number of people who are set to suffer forced displacement today is historically unprecedented. The data provided by the report UNHRC Global Trends 2018: Forced Displacement in 2018 speak for themselves: by the end of 2016, 70.8 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as

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a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, and there were 25.9 million refugees, 41.3 million internally displaced persons and 3.5 million asylum-seekers. As far as Australia was concerned, of the total number of refugees who had their status recognised or were resettled recently, only about 1.5 per cent were assisted by this country, which thus ranked third overall for resettlement (behind Canada and USA).

In global terms, Australia was ranked 29th for recognition of refugees in 2018. Moreover, successive Australian governments have kept on selecting refugees on account of their already existing community links in the country and other restrictive criteria, such as their fluency in the English language, skills or religion. In line with the fears of invasion and xenophobic attitudes that white colonial Australians showed towards indenture migrants coming from Asia during the nineteenth century (Walker, 1999), since the 1990s Australian politicians have kept on using a similar anti-immigration rhetoric, which has prompted the proliferation of hoaxes and fake news about refugees and asylum seekers, in particular the so-called ‘boat people’ (asylum seekers who arrive by boat are a security threat and queue jumpers; they could have stopped in other safe countries; they do not contribute to Australian society, among others).

To mention but two well-known politicians, Pauline Hanson openly showed her hostility towards Asians in her maiden speech to the Australian House of Parliament in 1996, and John Howard enforced the 2001 Pacific Solution, under which asylum-seekers could be processed offshore and removed to detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Harsh border laws were further passed in 2013 with the implementation of the Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) by the coalition led by the Abbott government. This operation advocated a ‘zero tolerance’ attitude towards what it was labelled as ‘Illegal Maritime Arrivals,’ in conjunction with the aforementioned mandatory detention in offshore detention facilities.

The persistence in Australia of a political discourse riddled with racist overtones can be explained, according to Ang (2001: 15), as a response to what this critic came to label as the Australians’ “racial/spatial anxiety.” Ang, together with many other scholars, such as Blainey (1968), Hage (1998), Hodge and Mishra (1991) and Huggan (2007), to name but some, concluded that Australia’s geographical distance from Britain and closeness to the Asian continent have been a constant source of anxiety for many white Australians since the arrival of the first fleet of British white settlers in Australia in 1788. As Collingwood-Whittick (2007: xiv-xv) sees it, most first settlers (convicts and free men alike) went through a deep crisis as a result of their geographical and cultural exclusion from their British motherland and of their subsequent efforts to turn a land they could only regard as alien and hostile into their new home. No wonder the first reaction of the British European settlers who arrived in Australia, Ang affirms, was to “claim *exclusiveness* of possession: Australia was to be for them only, that is, for ‘the white man’” (2001: 128; emphasis in original). Consequently, all of those who did not fulfil that definition were to be “considered undesirable, on the grounds that a superior race –

the white race— should not mix with inferior races” (128). The implementation in 1901 of the Australian Immigration Restriction Bill, also known as White Australia Policy, only contributed to bolstering the racist attitudes predominant during the British colonial period. The outcome of these policies was that many of the non-white people who were already in the country, in particular Asians coming from countries such as India, Japan and China, were expelled from Australia.

In spite of the opening of the Australian borders to immigrants coming from European countries after World War Two and the subsequent implementation of Australia’s multicultural state policy in the early 1970s, Australia’s anti-immigration laws still fell prey to white supremacist beliefs (Hage, 1998). As a matter of fact, Ang goes on to explain, it was not until the mid-1970s, when a group of Indonesian refugees fleeing the Vietnam War were eventually admitted into the country, that Australia became “a multiracial (and not just a multicultural) society” (2001: 132). Although it is true that the ever-increasing development of the economies of the South East and East Asian countries in the global economy during the 1980s and 1990s led many Australian economists and politicians to look on Australia’s Asian neighbouring countries rather more favourably (Asia was all of a sudden regarded as an economic partner that could foster and guarantee the survival and prosperity of Australia), old racist prejudices still lay at the core of the new policies that were apparently facilitating the inclusion in Australian society of these non-whites, who thus became paradoxically subject to “an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of *inclusion by virtue of othering*” (Ang, 2001: 139; emphasis in original). Although Australian nationalism has undoubtedly changed to try to incorporate a multiracial nation, the culture of White Australia still remains dominant, as the texts under discussion in this paper will show.

## **2. NATIONALISMS VS. TRANSNATIONALISM: TRANSMODERNITY AND COSMOPOLITISATION**

Nationalism as a concept developed with the rise of capitalism and the nation state over the last few centuries and, as Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider explain, “takes the following premises for granted: it equates societies with nation-state societies and sees states and their governments,” not only “as the primary focus of social-scientific analysis” but also as “the most fundamental category of political organisation” (2006: 3). In the case of former settler colonies, such as Australia, these assumptions were further fostered with a view to consolidating their socio-political independence from the metropolis. However, in our ever more interconnected world, Beck contends, it is clear that “territorial, state, economic, social and cultural borders still do exist, but they no longer coincide” (2012: 302) and “are no longer

coterminous” (303). It is no longer possible to establish a clear distinction between the national and the international, the global and the local, nor between allegedly homogeneous political units. New realities are arising, and so far impregnable barriers between nation states are becoming more and more porous.

New space and time coordinates testify to the emergence and need of a new and more inclusive paradigm. According to philosopher Rodríguez Magda (2017: 5-6), ‘trans’ is, without doubt, the most appropriate prefix to characterise this new era: not only does it testify to the current trend of transcending the limits of Modernity and Postmodernity, but it also encapsulates a world in constant change, articulated around transnational organisations, problems, events, communities and structures. In tune with this, she coined the term Transmodernity to name this new socio-ideological paradigm, mainly characterised by the multiple overlappings and encounters with cultural others fostered by the current global non-stop flows of population. Rodríguez Magda explains her choice as follows: “if modern culture corresponded to industrial society, and postmodern society to postmodern culture, a globalised society corresponds to the type of culture I call *transmodern*” (2017: 6; emphasis in original). However, she makes no secret of the fact that Transmodernity does not necessarily have positive connotations, nor should it be understood as a technological and happy utopia.

It is simply there and brings together so far contradictory cosmovisions and ideas, with the result that, in the matter at hand, the rooted, nationalistic and static conception of dwelling upon which old and new nationalisms are based must be pitted against the rootless, international, mobile, de-territorialised conditions of cosmopolitan/globalised culture that define and promote contemporary transnationalism. In keeping with Rodríguez Magda’s clarification, Beck (2012) also states that the nation-state frame is rather inadequate and insufficient, particularly when it comes to discussing and finding solutions to social inequality. Accordingly, some further step should be taken, and a different kind of conceptual frame should be adopted, one that

calls for an idea of ‘cosmopolitisation’ as ‘enmeshment’ with the cultural Other [...] rather than simply being dependent on something that is on the outside. Cosmopolitisation therefore is not cosmopolitanism, not globalisation, not only diversity or transnationalism, since neither diversity itself nor transnationalism nor globality guarantee the existential encounter with ‘the Other.’ (Beck, 2012: 304)

Being aware of the positive connotations with which the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ is very often used (mainly to refer to an affluent elite that has willingly chosen to travel the world), Beck and Sznaider (2006) make it clear that they endow ‘cosmopolitisation’ with a different and rather more polysemic and encompassing meaning, given the fact that “the choice to become or remain an ‘alien’ or a ‘non-national’ is not as a general rule a voluntary one but a response to acute need, political repression or a threat of starvation” (2006: 7-8). In short, contrary to what some cosmopolitanism theories may lead us to think, it is not the elites that

mainly encapsulate the contemporary cosmopolitan condition, but rather ‘the wretched of the earth,’ to make use of Franz Fanon’s well-known expression.

### 1.1. Cosmopolitans vs. Refugees/ Abject Cosmopolitans

When talking about diasporic and transnational people, critics like Simon Gikandi (2010) insist on affirming, a clear distinction should be made between two different groups, namely, that of free and affluent *cosmopolitans* and that of destitute and homeless *outcasts* or *refugees*. For the more privileged *cosmopolitans*, displacement is regarded as a form of recognition, something to be proud of, since this is their way to become ‘global,’ this being understood in the widest and most enriching sense of the word. Moreover, parochial loyalties, whether local or national, must be somehow discarded so that this cultural elite can abide by a set of universal moral obligations, and thus become fully transnational and cosmopolitan. In contrast to this, the lower strata of *refugee* and *migrant* populations who had to flee their homes for the sake of survival often profess a radical attachment to older cultural forms, which are many times deemed dangerous. More often than not, the refugees’ cultural difference brings about anxieties and fears.

As a result, Amartya Sen contends, there has been in Western societies “a periodic but persistent demand that immigrants give up their traditional lifestyles and adopt the dominant living modes in the society to which they have immigrated” (2006: 153). What remains clear, according to Gikandi, is that “the refugee is the Other of the cosmopolitan” (2010: 26), and thus the positive narrative of being global must be pitted against the rather more negative narrative of statelessness and dispossession. In order to prevent unwanted refugees from entering their countries, Peter Nyers contends (2003: 1069), Western governments, including Australia, have implemented new technologies of control (detention) and mechanisms of exclusion (deportation). ‘Security’ has become the catchword that justifies all sorts of restrictive laws and policies that create an intricate tangle of bureaucratic and physical obstacles to prevent border-crossing. The outcome of this is, according to Nyers (2003: 1070), the emergence of a global ‘ban-opticon,’ which determines who is to be kept under surveillance and who is to be free of such control, to the point that the former end up becoming a new class of *abject cosmopolitans*, an abject diaspora or *deportspora*. The term ‘abject cosmopolitanism’ is, without doubt, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms that demands some sort of clarification. Whereas cosmopolitanism, as was argued before, is usually defined as ‘belonging to all parts of the world,’ abjection comes from the Latin root *abjectus*, meaning ‘throw away’ or ‘cast off.’ The abject is, consequently, someone who is discarded and rejected, that is, an outcast. While the cosmopolitan feels at home everywhere, the abject is marked by rootlessness

and displacement. These two terms consequently make up a binary whereby they relate to each other in exclusively oppositional terms, such as belonging/exclusion, welcome/expelled, and pleasant/disgusting. Yet, as Judith Butler explains (1993: 3), “the exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings.” To put it differently, the welcome and desirable cosmopolitan condition necessarily relies and depends on the construction of an abject other.

In Butler’s words, the abject are “those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the defining limit of the subject’s domain” (3). The relationship between abjection and cosmopolitanism is not, therefore, one of mutual exclusion, but rather one of mutual interdependence. In Nyers’s words, “abject cosmopolitanism describes not a *problematic cosmopolitanism for the abject*, but rather a *problematizing cosmopolitanism of the abject*” (2003: 1075; emphasis in original).

Another paradox worth taking into consideration is that brought to the fore by Bonnie Honig in her seminal work *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2001: 103-105), namely that, as the importance of the figure of the ‘foreign-founder’ in Western political culture suggests, every national culture must be refurbished, that is, must re-found itself every now and then. This is inextricably related to what she calls a ‘doubleness’ to foreignness, as foreignness can function as both a support and a threat to the political community at stake. The figure of the iconic ‘good immigrant,’ who complies with the host country’s values and norms, is thus necessarily partnered with that of the ‘bad immigrant,’ who threatens to question and destroy them. The myth of immigrant Australia could be a case in point. According to it, the continuation of Australia’s prosperity and democratic political culture depends upon the industriousness and enthusiasm of incoming immigrant populations. In these cases, Honig argues, the foreigner becomes a “supplement to the nation, an agent of national reenchantment” (2001: 74) that provides evidence that the nation is still capable of enchanting and encouraging newcomers into acquiring membership.

However, as is often the case, the same arguments used to define the good immigrant (uncomplaining, hard-working) can be eventually turned around to create the breeding ground for xenophobic feelings (job-stealing, responsible for the falling of wages). In tune with this, a similar distinction can be made between ‘the foreigner’ (a person from another country, bearing papers issued by that country and therefore covered by reciprocal agreements like treaties on tax or extradition) and ‘the refugee’ (a person who is not only foreign but either lacks a country or the diplomatic protection of their country, and is therefore not amenable to management via routine procedures of state-to-state diplomacy). Although both ‘the foreigner’ and ‘the refugee’ are constitutive categories of modern nation states, they are not the same thing, as ‘the refugee,’ to rely on Honig’s terminology once again, is often regarded as ‘the bad immigrant.’ Refugees

are in consequence no longer regarded as victims, but rather as danger, even potential terrorists. It is this (so often unfounded) fear that has led a number of governments—namely, Australia, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Switzerland, the UK and the US—to uphold indefinite immigration detention. The Australian case is especially appalling, since asylum seekers there are separated from their families and confined in inhuman conditions in institutions which are nothing but “breeding grounds for rape, rioting, malaria and mental illness” that “bear the look and feel of concentration camps” (Neubauer, 2014).

### 3. AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE AND REFUGEES

In contrast to these theories, and in keeping with Peter Nyers’s contention that “when speechless victims begin to speak about the politics of protection, this has the effect of putting the political into question” (2003: 1089), it is my contention that stateless people can nonetheless have some kind of agency when, following Rancière’s conviction, in a radical political moment they somehow manage to speak and spell out their grievances. Politics, for Rancière (1999), is an activity that has equality as its principle. However, equality is neither a given nor an essence, but rather “an assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices of implementing it” (1999: 33). The practices that enact political equality do not necessarily entail the legal status of citizenship, though. Acts of citizenship, Rancière insists, can be enacted by citizen and non-citizen subjects alike. According to him, politics is “a specific kind of connection” that “comes about solely through interruption” (12-13), and this also involves the moments when the abject, that is, those who have been excluded from the common world, succeed in articulating a grievance as if they were full-fledged speaking subjects. This is, for Rancière, the quintessential political moment whereby the abject/excluded paradoxically manage, against all odds, to become political agents under new terms, taking a position very different, in fact diametrically opposed, from that given them by the dominant social space.

The proliferation of different kinds of Australian narratives on and by refugees clearly testifies to this subversive potential, as all of these texts above all strive to denounce the plight suffered by refugees and asylum-seekers, very often in the face of increasingly harsh border laws. In order to prove the dehumanising conditions that they must undergo in detention centres, together with the indifference, if not contempt, that a number of Australians feel towards them, I will rely on a selection of stories, writings and testimonies that tackle this particular issue in three different collections that, in the Australian context, deserve special mention —*They Cannot Take the Sky* (Green & Dao, 2017), *A Country Too Far* (Scott & Keneally, 2013), and *Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark* (Cole, 2017)— as well as Behrouz

Boochani's polemical text *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018). The first thing that should be brought to the fore, though, is how different these texts are from one another.

*They Cannot Take the Sky* is a collection of testimonies narrated by people who have sought asylum in Australia, and have subsequently experienced immigration detention. It was produced by the activist oral history collective *Behind the Wire*, which includes journalists such as Michael Green and lawyers such as Andre Dao, among other professionals. The book contains an informative and humble account of how these published testimonies were produced: they were not simply written down by their authors, but narrated in various ways (including oral history interviews), with the final text agreed in dialogue with the editors—who, for example, tried to make sure that the narrators did not say anything that might put themselves or their loved ones at risk, either in Australia or their home countries. In line with this collection but partly different is Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*, a hybrid text that conflates memoir, reportage and the conventions of the fable. One of the most harrowing factual accounts included in *They Cannot Take the Sky* is that of Ali Bakhtiarvandi, whose sorry story is narrated in "I wore a black shirt to my ceremony." Ali left Iran and arrived in Australia by boat in 2000, aged 34. He was one of the so-called 'boat people' who, according to the government, had to be stopped at all costs whereas, as Elliot Perlman states in an essay from *A Country Too Far*, "it's not really the boats that are the problem," but "the kind of people who are trying to get here. [...] They're brown, they're Asian, sometimes they're black, they don't speak English" (in Scott & Keneally 2016: 22). In fact, as Tom Keneally in the same collection argues, "80 per cent of boat arrivals are recognised in the end as genuine refugees, as against fewer than three in ten plane arrivals" (234). Australia, Perlman goes on to explain (22-23), had other pressing problems (apology to Indigenous Australians, adult functional illiteracy, destruction of the manufacturing sector, unemployment, and xenophobic attacks against ethnic minorities, among others), but the major parties found them so difficult to solve that they refused to acknowledge their existence and kept on criminalising refugees and asylum-seekers by shouting the 'stop de boats' mantra instead. The dynamics underlying this transfer process are explained by Rosa Urtiaga as follows:

In the same way as the subject repudiates the other to protect the borders of the self, the sovereign nation state protects its borders by expelling undocumented immigrants and other undesirable people. [...] the inherent contradiction between the widely shared notion of [Australia] as a country of immigrants (and similar noble ideals) and the harshness of immigration policies is resolved through the criminalisation of the immigrant. (2017: 198)

A victim of these criminalising policies, Ali was detained until 2004 in three different detention centres. Against all odds and unlike many others who did not finally manage to make it, he is now an Australian citizen. A political activist in Iran from as early as 1979, he is happy to continue helping refugees in Australia. While in detention, he suffered reclusion in isolation



blocks, a hunger strike, and constant humiliations. After having been told once and again that “the Australian government and the Australian people, they don’t like people like you. [...] That’s why we’re not going to give you a visa” (in Green & Dao 2017: 131), one day, much to his surprise, he has the visit of an Australian woman who offers to marry him so that he can be released. At first he rejects her offer, but finally accepts. However, getting married does not provide him with the expected freedom, which he would only get two years later. Unfortunately, when he is finally granted citizenship, he feels as if he had nothing to celebrate.

I wore a black shirt to my ceremony. [...] For this piece of paper I spent nine years of my life. Four and a half years in the detention centre, then carrying a huge bill on my shoulders, and now nine days ago I lost my sister. [...] No, they have to know that if you play games with people’s lives it’s really dangerous. If you lose money, you can make money. If you lose your life, you cannot make it again. (146-47)

His marriage only lasted for a short while. Too much suffering, too many traumas prevented this union from being successful. The same traumas that still haunt many survivors who, like Faris, the main character in Arnold Zable’s short story “Zahra’s Lullaby,” know that “this is a story of profound loss and tragedy. It will always be like that. It cannot be otherwise. The tattoo will never be washed off. To expect so, is an insult. And yet ... it is also a tale of profound love” (in Scott & Keneally 2016: 126). The same love that encourages Ali to help those who, like himself, are fighting for their survival and their human rights.

However, if there is a testimony in *They Cannot Take the Sky* that clearly illustrates the power of the abject to speak and, by so doing, become a truly subversive political subject, it is that offered by Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist from Iran, human rights defender, writer and film producer who was held on Manus Island from 2013 until its closure in 2017. As is shown in this collection, Boochani kept on working tirelessly from detention in order to denounce the “systematic torture” (in Green & Dao 2017: 13) that all detainees must suffer there on an everyday basis. He refuses to call Manus a ‘camp,’ and uses the word ‘prison’ instead, although he also makes it very clear that, unlike prisoners, they have no rights whatsoever (4). Among other things, he says, as soon as they arrive there they are deprived of their names (he became MEG45), that is, of their identity, both as individuals and as political subjects. As Boochani argues, “this system is trying to take people’s personalities by calling them by a number and humiliating them. After a long time they think they are not human” (9). Unable to make himself heard, one day he climbed up a tree to be “above the fences,” and thus free, “outside the prison.” As he argues, no matter how much deprivation they have to suffer, “the sky is like a friend for a prisoner, because around you everything is metal fences, but the sky, they cannot take the sky” (20).

And neither can they deprive them of their wish to speak and write. Boochani soon lost trust in the Australian justice, which mainly led him to stop using journalist language to write

in a literary register instead because, as he saw it, “only in literary language can people understand our life and our condition” (3). It is Boochani’s belief in the power of literature that led him, in 2018 and against all odds, to write and publish *No Friend but the Mountains*. Thumbed in Farsi on a phone and smuggled out of Manus Island to his translator Omid Tofighian in the form of text messages, this book narrates Boochani’s hazardous voyage from Indonesia to Australia, his detention on Christmas Island, and the ordeal he went through on Manus from his arrival there in 2013 until the detainees’ 2014 February riots and the final closing down of the centre in October 2017. It has been so widely praised by both academics and ordinary readers that in January 2019 it was awarded the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Victorian Premier’s prize for Nonfiction. According to Boochani (2019) on receiving this award, this achievement was “a victory not only for [asylum seekers and refugees], but for literature and art and above all for humanity.” As Royo-Grasa (2019) argued in her presentation on *No Friend but the Mountains*, this book describes and denounces the sophisticated and oppressive physical and discursive structures that rule the Australian indefinite detention regime by categorising the offshore Manus centre as a Kyriarchal prison, to then analyse his approach to the island’s ecosystem and local culture as his main form of endurance and resistance against the system. A term coined by radical feminist Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992, ‘kyriarchy’ stands for a social system or set of connecting social systems built around submission, oppression and domination, whereby the subordination of one person or group to another is inexorably internalised and institutionalised. To quote Boochani’s definition, “the Kyriarchal system [that rules Manus prison] “is a complex set of structures that subject imprisoned refugees to relentless and pervasive practices of micro-control and macro-control” (2018a: 528). Physical violence, negative stereotyping and constant surveillance are some of the main weapons that this system uses to make detainees feel that they “[have] been transformed into someone else,” namely, “a crushed person,” “someone extremely degraded,” “someone worthless” (2018b: 97–98).

Moreover, the prison is ruled by a never-ending hierarchy of unequally ranked employees, which makes it impossible for the detainees to know whom they must address, either to complain or blame for their precarious situation. In keeping with Giorgio Agamben’s account of biopolitics (1998), it could be argued that the population of detainees is produced as a site of regulation, control and intervention. Therefore, the person as such is missing: under the sovereign power of the Manus prison detainees are produced as *bare life*, that is, as life with no political status. The ultimate aim of their alienation and subsequent criminalisation is to “strike fear” (Boochani 2018b: 93) into both Australian citizens and asylum seekers themselves: fear prevents Australians from feeling any kind of sympathy for them, whereas asylum seekers are dissuaded from travelling to Australia in so far as they know that imprisonment is the one and only destiny that awaits them there. Similarly, this Kyriarchal system does its best to stop any kind of alliance between the Manusians and the asylum seekers:

Manusians are told that asylum seekers are dangerous criminals and terrorists, while asylum seekers are made to believe that Manusians are cannibals. Another strategy used to foster enmity and competition between all the interns is queuing: they must queue for everything—food, cigarettes, the telephone, medicines—on a first come, first served basis, which means that, in order to survive, nobody should feel any kind of compassion for the rest. Boochani also makes it clear that the absolute control exercised by this system is on a par with the way in which it degrades and abusively exploits the natural environment nearby. In order to counter this aggressive manipulation of natural resources, Boochani advocates the detainees' close alliance with the Manusian environment as a form of resistance.

The ocean and the jungle are no longer described as rivals, but rather as friendly elements that can imbue detainees with hope and strength. Finally, Boochani relies on the conventions of the fable and the symbolism of the Manusian Chauka bird, whose singing can alternatively imply death, birth and honesty, to better denounce the deaths of some of the most decent asylum seekers, such as *The Smiling Youth* (Hamid) and *the Gentle Giant* (Reza), praise their great humanity and illustrate and enforce his defence of mutual trust and solidarity between all the interns. The book concludes with a poem that brings together the “lamentation of nature” and the “lamentation of the human being” (356). To rely on Rancière (1999)'s ideas once again, it could be concluded that Boochani's impossible activism (impossible because he has been denied by the Australian establishment any kind of political agency) brings to the surface the contradictory and violent nature of this sovereign detention system and, more importantly, that the risks taken by the abject/excluded can in turn undermine and put to the test the very foundations of a system that strives to preserve its sovereignty at the cost of depriving them of their humanity. If these people are somehow able to verbalise their disagreement in order to demand their rights and thus challenge the established order, Boochani's book suggests in tune with Rancière's argument, they can speak and act in a most meaningful way.

The fact that *No Friend but the Mountains*, together with most of the testimonies compiled in *They Cannot Take the Sky*, are translations of the asylum seekers' traumatic testimonies and stories narrated in other languages flags up another important issue, namely, the role played by the translator in this process. In keeping with the theories put forward by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (1992), it is my contention that these testimonies should be seen as the result of an always-in-motion dialectical process between victim/speaker and translator, the latter thus becoming, not only the mediator, but also the empathic listener who helps the victim to articulate and bring her/his traumatic experience to consciousness. For this to be possible, the translator should become the victim's “companion” (Laub 1992: 59) and remain attentive to her/his gaps and silences. Moreover, as Laub goes on to argue (64), there should also be a shared knowledge between both parts, as it is this mutual trust that can alone

provide the speaker with the confidence s/he needs to openly talk. To give but one example, Boochani and Tofighian shared a similar cultural and philosophical background, as the latter's words in *The Conversation* (2018) explain: "Behrouz and I had a mutual understanding; in fact, the translation team embodied a kind of collective intention or shared agency. Our literary and philosophical interpretations evolved throughout the process."

As far as *A Country Too Far* is concerned, this is a collection of writings *about* asylum seekers, *by* writers who are mostly not asylum seekers or refugees, though some have some close family experiences. The texts themselves vary, as they belong to different genres such as poetry, prose fiction and non-fiction. As Rosie Scott, one of the contributors to this collection, claimed in the Introduction, "the idea of this anthology was to ask some of our most admired Australian writers to bring a different perspective and depth to the public debate on asylum seekers [...] [because only] the best writers can get to the heart of things in a way that almost no one else can because of the truthfulness, power and clarity of their language" (2016: 1). It is precisely this conviction that Raimond Gaita proclaims in his essay "Obligation to Need" (in Scott & Keneally, 2016), when he affirms that "understanding of what it means to commit and to suffer the crimes prohibited by international law is often deepened by art –when a film, a painting, a play, a novel or a poem, for example, moves us.

Art provides a different model for universality than does science or a political or moral philosophy" (101). After all, the personal is political, all the more so when the person fights to stop being deprived of her/his humanity. As Gaita concludes, no one should sink into "a state of dumb and ceaseless lamentation" (94), "no one should be so alienated from their ordinary, alienable dignity that only a saint can see them as fully human" (99). This inevitably brings to mind Hannah Arendt's claim (1978: 300) that, once a person becomes a human being in general by being deprived of certain fundamental features of her/his humanity, s/he loses all significance, as this human status does not prompt respect or humanitarian feelings, but quite the opposite. In many cases, detainees rebel against this alienating dehumanisation by turning to self-mutilation and, even worse if possible, by showing no empathy towards their fellows. This is the situation that Debra Delaide describes in her short story "The Master Shavers' Association of Paradise" (in Scott & Keneally, 2016). Some of the men in the detention camp feel so desperate that they end up "slashing [themselves] with one carefully cultivated thumbnail, slicing across [their] other wrist as if [they] were cutting through banana skin" (27). Sometimes they go as far as to stitch [their] lips with plastic thread teased from a rope and a needle from a dried chicken bone" (28). Didier Fassin (2012: 110-11) gives the ultimate reason for this: they find it difficult to speak, especially when the stories they tell are deemed nonsensical or untrue; when words are no longer seen as truthful, the body becomes the one and only source of truth; speech is therefore replaced by the body or, to put it differently, their denunciation stories can only be written on their decaying body, which thus threatens to become a corpse, "the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva, 1982: 3-4).

Significantly enough, the acronym that the guards have emblazoned on their shirts — AIDS— although actually standing for ‘Australian Immigration Detention Service,’ also relates detainees to one of the most stigmatising contemporary diseases (34). Neither can these men feel any kind of compassion for the others: when one man begins to cry as he remembers the deaths by drowning of his sons and the abduction of his wife and daughters, the one behind him in the queue sniggers and gives him a look of contempt as if saying, “Only drowned? He should be so lucky” (34). Some other times, they give vent to their frustration by “throwing [themselves] at the fence screaming obscenities about the guards’ mothers or sisters” (27) or “tip[ping] the contents of their plates onto the floor and then the plates, before turning and walking out” of the mess hall (30-31). These are the effects of hopelessness and extreme boredom —there is nothing they can do other than sit in the opening of their tents, staring at the others, also sitting at the opening of theirs, while waiting for lunch and then dinner, and this one day after another (31)— let alone utter deprivation: the frequent rain, “the hunger, the parching heat and of course the thirst when there was water all around” (31). The Red Cross volunteers, who used to run a weekly afternoon discussion group and lend them books from their library so that their English would become good enough to read them, left “before that time arrived” (32). However, there is one boy who takes it upon himself to reaffirm his humanity by becoming useful and endowing the rest of men with some dignity. A barber apprentice in his home country until his master and many others were murdered by the soldiers, and he and his family consequently had to flee carrying the few valuables they still had with them, he decides to offer the rest of detainees free shaves and trims. In a display of the best sense of humour, he puts up a sign, “chalk on cardboard. Propped at the doorway [...], The Master Shavers’ Association of Paradise. Free Life Membership. Shaves and Haircuts. No appt. necessary” (38).

The sign makes reference to the controversial answer that he gave to the lawyers who denied him a passport and a visa when they asked him, “where do you think you are?” and he replied, “I am in Paradise” (35). Irony does not end here, though. This boy turns the other men in the camp into his *de facto* clients, which clearly parodies the use that this word is given by the institution that rules the camp, which also calls detainees ‘clients.’ At the end of the short story, these men are going to be transferred to another detention centre further into the island, and this is the justification given by the authorities’ official report: “The clients are termed problematic. [...] Clients refuse to formalise their concerns in writing. Clients continue to be involved in voluntary starvation protests. Clients are being monitored. Termination of client services is imminent” (39). This boy, who after all this time in detention has already become a man, waits to be transferred with the rest of detainees but, unlike them, he carries the cardboard sign in his hands, thus vindicating his humanity and his profession and well-deserved right to

have clients, while holding a mirror to the perverted system that calls them like that while depriving them of their freedom.

A similar disheartening situation is described in Denise Leith's short story "The Garden" (in Scott & Keneally, 2016). Its main character, Sa'eed, has been in detention for more than three years. He feels so lonely and misses his wife so much that he has begun counting even the days since a woman has touched him. However, with the help of Siobhan, an Australian woman who regularly comes to visit him and one day decides to bring him seeds, and of Colin, the detention centre guard that provides Sa'eed with the basic tools required to dig up the land and water his seeds, he manages to make a miracle: he makes a garden and grows vegetables and flowers "like [his] garden back home" (2016: 81). As Siobhan exclaims when contemplating it: "You have created a thing of beauty in this place, Sa'eed" (85). An oasis of beauty in the middle of hell that will offer some hope to the rest of men confined there, especially Raheem, who all of a sudden does not seem to be so depressed. Much to Sa'eed's surprise, Raheem is now interested in living and making life possible: he harvests the fruits when they are ready and has even put a plastic bucket in the middle of one of the flowerbeds to make sure the birds can quench their thirst.

When Sa'eed is informed that one of his sons has died (nobody can tell him which one, which fills him with anguish), the tables are paradoxically turned, as it is now Raheem who tries to help his friend by saying: "Sa'eed, you know it's not good for you to think of what you've lost. It'll drive you crazy in this place" (88). Sa'eed used to say something similar to Raheem before, and knows this is the one and only thing they can do if they want to keep themselves alive and, most important of all, sane. This garden has therefore become much more than a small *locus amoenus*; it provides Sa'eed with the smells that can alone bring back bittersweet memories of his wife Aasera and his happy family life back in Lebanon, before he had to flee to Syria for his own safety, only to end up in an Australian detention centre. The garden encapsulates these desperate men's resilience and hope. Not in vain are "potluck" and "never-ending basil" Sa'eed's favourite plants (80, 82). Last but not least, these men's capacity to generate beauty within hell itself ultimately endows them with the dignity, and thus the humanity, of which they were officially deprived. Not in vain what matters most to Sa'eed is respect and affection, in a word, to know if he will one day be accepted as a full-fledged member of the Australian community.

I'm always testing them, wanting to know if the Australians like me or not. [...] No matter how many times I tell myself that it's not important I know that it might be the one thing that decides whether I can stay in Australia or not. It's another one of those ideas that keep chasing around in my head. (82)

Sa'eed's suffering, however, does not prevent him from acknowledging the kindness and affection shown to him by some Australians: Siobhan, Colin, even his unsuccessful lawyer, whom he cannot but pity, because he has "too many cases; too much worry" (83). Respect and

care for the environment and the Other restitutes humanity to even those who were officially deprived of it; only respect and care can make a garden possible, and thus turn this detention centre into a small beacon of light and hope.

Rosie Scott's "Tender Mercies" (in Scott & Keneally, 2016) also brings to the fore the dignity of Mohamed, a teacher and democracy activist who had to leave his country and travel to Australia in search of asylum, but whose appeals have been once and again rejected. In contrast to him, the official who is in charge of considering his case is described as "an android" (159), a "dweeb" (162), a man deprived of "pity, humour, despair, the vulnerabilities of love" (159-60), who reminds the social worker who is doing her best to help Mohamed of certain mediocre boys she used to know at university: "the grey ones, the nay-sayers, the haters," who "never doubted themselves for a minute," and "made it clear they would get revenge one day, exacted drop by drop over a lifetime if necessary" (160). "That's what you say" (155-56) and "we didn't ask him to come here" (157) are his only reply to this woman when she defends the truth of Mohamed's testimony. "Solid evidence" is regarded by him as "flimsy evidence" (157). Moreover, he makes no secret of the fact that he despises all kinds of international groups (PEN, Amnesty International, Journalists without Borders, the UN) because, as he sees it, "they don't have any authority for Australians," have got "a hidden agenda" and are "weak on terrorism" (156). Helen, the Australian lawyer who, like the social worker, is doing her best to defend the case of Mohamed and many others like him, is "in burn-out," not knowing whether she can go on any longer (162). Looking for publicity is also hard at the moment, because "even the decent journos are talking about compassion fatigue" (161). The outcome cannot be any worse: Mohamed undergoes a drastic change, he starts to rant and shout at everybody till one day he can take it no more and is found dead in his cell in Villawood (155). The short story opens with the announcement of his death in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and concludes with the nightmare/ foreboding that the social worker had after her visit to the detention centre: "She was trying to find him. In the distance she could hear his voice calling to her from the darkness, but she couldn't reach him" (162). This deadly circular structure only confirms what Mohamed has finally learnt: that there is no way out, no hope whatsoever for people like him.

*Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark* is a collection of short stories by a single author, Catherine Cole, who has written across many genres and, again, is not herself a refugee. Neither is this a collective work put together by an editor or editors. The reason why this collection has also been included is to prove how relevant this issue has become among contemporary Australian authors who, like Cole, are doing their best to bring an awareness to questions of guilt and blame, but also of compassion and kindness which, in their opinion, should be taken into serious consideration when discussing the treatment of refugees in contemporary Australian society. On the one hand, stories like "Home" delve into the traumatic sense of loss and loneliness that refugees like Ahmed feel when, after many years of waiting, finally manage

to become “*unofficial*” (24; emphasis in original) —this is the way in which Bert, his former Australian official visitor and nowadays friend, puts it when taking him to the “flimsy house” (30) he has been given until his papers are ready. Ahmed can only think of the dead, the ones that he left behind and, significantly, his house is “a stone’s throw from Rookwood Cemetery” (24). Moreover, he does not belong to the wealthy part of Sydney, “with its million-dollar flats and shining department stores and botanical gardens and all the water” (29). Instead, he inhabits the part in which migrants have gathered, and “the roads develop potholes, the trees thin, leaving only bare streets and littered parks and tired amenities [and] dilapidated houses” (29). This division of the city into two immiscible parts echoes Michel Agier’s denunciation of the “partition between two great world categories that are increasingly reified: on the one hand, a clean, healthy and visible world; on the other, the world’s residual ‘remnants,’ dark, diseased and invisible” (2011: 4), and by extension disposable.

It is only the letter he eventually receives from his daughter, saying that she and his grandson are on their way to Australia to join him that makes him cling to the future with some tentative optimism. On the other hand, stories like “Plenty” wonderfully illustrate the conflation of contradictory feelings and opinions held by many Australians. In this story, several old-time friends get together to have lunch in the house of one of the couples, located in a beautiful natural enclave close to a harbour. Lizzie, one of the women, happens to have a problematic brother with serious mental problems who is now picking fruit for the season in the company of asylum-seekers with temporary protection visas. Lizzie thinks that this is a wonderful idea because “It’s good for everyone that way. Community respect. Self-respect. People can contribute to the economy” (Cole, 2017: 224). Besides, her brother Dan is learning a lot about the political situation in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and, as Lizzie sees it, “meeting some men who have seen awful times and have come here with optimism in their hearts just might help him to get a greater sense of his own potential” (227). However, Lizzie seems to be the only one in the group who sees things this way. Contrary to her, most of the others, especially the men, believe that these people are nothing but “queue jumpers [...] [who] think they have a right to just help themselves to this country” (224, 225), and who are depriving Australians of potential jobs, when it is made clear that the main reason why farmers are employing these asylum-seekers is that “Australians aren’t always available for that kind of job [and] without them, they’d close down and that would be no good for the town” (226). They prefer clinging to false myths to acknowledging facts, since this is their best way to justify their groundless xenophobia. Their heated argument about asylum-seekers reminds Delia, one of the women, of a scene in James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which the family starts fighting at the dinner table, and the man says: “No God for Ireland! We have had too much God in Ireland. Away with God!” (226-27). Once they have all left, Phoebe, the owner of the house, finds it difficult to get to sleep and meditates on what has happened. Her conclusion speaks for itself:



Too much cheese, too many oysters. At least there had been plenty for everyone [...]. The lunch had gone well, she decided, despite its lurch towards politics. [...] For a moment they'd verged on a James Joyce moment – *too much God in Ireland* [...]. Well, perhaps there's too much of everything in Australia. From the harbour came the mournful call of a gull. [...] When she couldn't sleep [...] she often heard seabirds crying in the harbour dark. (228; emphasis in original)

This may be the problem, after all: when there is plenty, nobody wants to share, and the preservation of the so-called 'national identity,' whatever this may mean, is systematically upheld, used and abused in order to preserve the privileged situation of a few and exclude the 'others,' who keep on crying in the dark.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Whatever our fears as people living in first-world countries, population mobility is not going to decrease, in spite of populist claims to the contrary. I agree with Serena Parekh that long-term encampment should be unequivocally rejected as a solution for forced displacement and, when temporarily required, it should be "supplemented with an *ethics of the temporary*" (2017: 137; emphasis in original) whereby the rights and dignity of the displaced are always safeguarded. What is required, Parekh goes on to argue (141), is a discourse rooted in what she labels as *remedial responsibility*, as we are unquestionably responsible for finding a solution to this; we may not have directly caused the problem, but we are somehow benefitting from the global system that ultimately triggered this humanitarian crisis. According to Parekh, two policies should go hand in hand: "supporting resettlement as a *duty* of states and policies of local integration while refugees await resettlement or repatriation" (142; emphasis in original). Temporary integration by means of development projects, as the story titled "Plenty" has shown, would allow refugees to live as part of the communities in which they find themselves until a more permanent solution can be found.

On the other hand, this would also benefit the host country and its population because, among other things, refugees would become rather more autonomous and not so dependent on international aid. Last but not least, Parekh insists (143), naturalisation and citizenship may have constraints (time, qualifications, etc.), but they should never be adamantly denied. Likewise, it should be remembered that refugees *are* agents, and must therefore have their own say in the matter. It is clear that a different kind of attitude is becoming increasingly crucial: one of confidence rather than tribal fear; one that brings to the fore the humanity of the refugee and the need and benefits of well-managed immigration; one that makes it clear that admission to a country entails responsibilities to integrate as well as rights to be treated unequivocally,

not only as a human being, but also as a full-fledged citizen. Hannah Arendt concluded that the condition of refugee is no longer exceptional, as it encapsulates the paradigm of a new historical consciousness. This is what led Giorgio Agamben to affirm that, in a context in which the nation state and traditional legal and political categories are inexorably declining, “the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come” (1995: 114). The refugee brings to the surface the main contradiction of the so far unquestionable principle of national sovereignty, as “precisely the figure that should have incarnated the rights of man *par excellence*, the refugee, constitutes instead the radical crisis of this concept” (116; emphasis in original). This is why, Agamben states, “inasmuch as the refugee unhinges the old trinity of state/nation/territory –this apparently marginal figure deserves rather to be considered the central figure of our political history” (117). In a word, to some extent we are all refugees. Therefore, the one and only solution is, for this thinker, to imagine political communities inhabiting the same space and in constant flux into one another, divided by reciprocal extraterritorialities “in which the guiding concept would no longer be the *ius* of the citizen, but rather the *refugium* of the individual” (118; emphasis in original).

And it is here that literature and testimonies come in handy. Literature as refuge, as that porous and liminal space that makes it possible for the imagination to enter uncharted cultural and psychological realms, thus turning the Other into an inextricable part of our own selves. Just as the activism of refugees and unwanted immigrants is recreating citizenship in ways that call for recognition and support rather than criminalisation and contempt, literature can alone prompt the reciprocity and flux demanded by Agamben as the only possible means to transcend the limits of the self and establish a generous and unconditional dialogue with the Other. An encounter that will lead us to put the political into question, and thus to accomplish some kind of action. In her introduction to her novel *All That I Am* (in Scott & Keneally, 2016), Anna Funder cannot explain this any better:

Writing is an act of imagining the lives of others, and as such an act of compassion as holy as any. It is an act designed to make sure we do not stop ourselves from imagining, properly and in every human detail, the plight of asylum seekers [...]. And it is an act designed to make sure that we do not stop here: that we do something. We need to honour our obligations to them, and to ourselves. (2016: 216)

Literature can therefore be regarded as the imaginative space of reflection that can ultimately allow for this fruitful interaction to happen, and thus contribute, however tentatively, to paving the way for fairer and more committed and sustainable societies worldwide. After all, as Agamben affirmed, “It is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man’s political survival today is imaginable” (1995: 119). Many inhabitants of the First World tend to believe, the texts discussed here suggest, that these ‘others’ will deprive us of our wealth and comfort, thus failing to realise that it may well indeed

be that we need them as much as they need us, if not more. As all of these stories and testimonies seem to claim, if we are kind enough to save and welcome them, they may just as well be kind enough to save us.

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