

GENEVIEVE LLOYD
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No Friend but the Mountains: An “Australian” Reading

Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains* is a work which defies exclusive categorisation as “refugee writing.” Its translator Omid Tofighian has pointed out, in the interpretive essay which accompanies the narrative, that it can also be appropriately described as “prison narrative,” “philosophical fiction,” “dissident writing”—along with other categories more directly associated with its author’s cultural background. That resistance to easy categorisation enriches the book. However, it can also give rise to some issues which bear, more generally, on the reception of “refugee writing.”

In an Australian context, similar issues can arise in relation to Indigenous writing. There are vexed questions, for example, around cultural difference and appropriation—concerning what limits should be set on literary exercises of imagining the lived experience of others, across structural inequalities. There are also issues around critical evaluation across those differences, concerning who gets to set the benchmarks of literary achievement in relation to the writing of “marginalised” groups. Similar questions have arisen in the past around the evaluation of female authors in relation to “male” norms. Is the achievement of Virginia Woolf diminished by categorising her work as “women’s writing”? Or is insight into gender difference crucial to recognising that extraordinary writing for what it is?

There may be no clear-cut answers to such questions. Yet reflective reading of *No Friend but the Mountains* can help bring the issues into clearer focus. To emphasise the book’s character as “refugee writing” can eclipse much that makes it such an extraordinary literary achievement. It is, of course, remarkable that the book—written secretly, using WhatsApp text messages—came to exist at all. Yet its literary quality stands independently of the circumstances of its production. On the other hand, to focus exclusively on its excellence as literature can underplay the significance of “refugee writing” as an emerging genre. For *No Friend but the Mountains* achieves its literary standing precisely in giving voice to contemporary *refugee* experience—as a mode of *human* experience.

As well as being rightly acclaimed as a literary masterpiece, *No Friend but the Mountains* has also been hailed as a powerful political exposé of chilling truths of Australia’s harsh asylum seeker policies. Yet, despite its literary success, the political import of the book remains to be fully absorbed and appreciated. Perhaps it is politically naive to see this disconnect as an anomaly. It may, though, also suggest that something has gone missing in the reception of the book.

No Friend but the Mountains is a work of non-fiction which employs literary strategies and techniques of a kind more commonly seen in fiction. It is a work of literature which engages in depth with philosophical issues. It is a politically oriented work which nonetheless avoids direct political polemic. Although the narrative is shaped by the pervasive theme of *exclusion* from Australia, its content—as many have noted—is nonetheless inexorably Australian. Yet this is not just an “Australian story.” It speaks to universal aspects of the mass movements of people at a time when borders are relentlessly closing. Beyond that, it articulates universal experience of

human fear, hope and grief; of cruelty, empathy and compassion; of the tragedy and comedy, the nobility and the absurdity, of being human.

To see *No Friend but the Mountains* through a lens of contentious political argumentation can miss that engagement with universal aspects of human experience. Yet to bypass the book’s political orientation is also to miss something crucial in its literary craftsmanship—its subtle shifts between the universal and the specific. Although it expresses what is universal in the human experience of contemporary refugees, it also speaks truth to operations of power within a specifically Australian context. For the refugee experience so trenchantly articulated here has been systematically rendered voiceless in the time and place of contemporary Australian consciousness.

In a more recently published opinion piece, Behrouz Boochani has posed the question: what does humanity mean in Australia?¹ The query has the form of a rhetorical question—and the tone of a cry from the heart. Yet it also resonates as a serious challenge. I want, in this essay, to reflect on the dual character of *No Friend but the Mountains*—its literary achievement in exploring the depths of human experience, and its political orientation towards what is happening in contemporary Australia. Towards that end, I will address the convergence of philosophical insights and literary strategies in the work. Throughout, I want to engage in a consciously *Australian* reading of the book, in the hope of better understanding why current refugee and asylum seeker policies have proved so resistant to change.

The facts of those policies are familiar. Yet they they have remained to a large extent unrealised in imagination—and hence beyond the reach of empathetic engagement. Political rhetoric has been largely successful in persuading a population that harsh treatment of those attempting to enter Australia by boat, without prior authorisation, has been a necessary—even

“compassionate”—exercise in preventing drownings in dangerous sea journeys. To be confronted by the lived experience of those measures can bring a shocked recognition of what the policies actually involve. Reading *No Friend but the Mountains* can be an overwhelming experience for any reader. For Australian readers, the shock can involve a form of *self*-recognition.

Time and Place: *Australia* as Symbol

Apart from the narration of a brief—though emotionally prolonged—period of waiting on Christmas Island, Australia has no physical presence in *No Friend but the Mountains*. Yet it has a pervasive symbolic presence. Australia is the destination longed for, but never reached. During the second boat journey from Indonesia, which sets the scene for the unfolding narrative, that symbol is imbued with hope. Australia is associated with a tiny luminous point on a distant horizon, summoning the will to survive. That symbolic content is dramatically transformed with the arrival of the real Australian naval ship, which will take the refugees to Christmas Island from the British cargo vessel that has rescued them.

In the hiatus of awaiting the transfer, the exhausted inertia of individual waiting is tempered by collective anticipation. All now stare fixedly at that point on the horizon from which the Australian ship is expected to appear, all desiring the same thing. Hope is experienced as an anticipatory happiness. Now everyone is cheerful. “Our gruelling odyssey has come to an end and—since the British captain has notified them—everyone is anticipating the arrival of the Australian Navy.”²

As many who have made those epic journeys have testified, *Australia*—as symbol of hope—is not necessarily associated with informed beliefs about the actual place. Contrary to what political rhetoric often

suggests, the symbolic role of Australia as destination could be replaced by equally indeterminate ideas of other places. Some do not even know, when they first leave their countries, where their journey will end. *Australia* can be just a vague yet powerful idea of survival, safety, freedom—or, more generally, a sense of having a future.

In the interim between the arrivals of the two vessels, the symbolic force of *Australia* begins to take on a more determinate association with sense of a future. It becomes a source of unity in the disparate group watching the far off horizon—“each carrying their unknown past, each one a survivor of a perilous journey ... all brought to this place by a single goal: the aim of arriving in the land known as Australia” (60).

The narrative then abruptly moves in a cleverly crafted reversal of spatial direction. “Things never happen the way you think they will. As everyone focuses on the distant horizon, a large ship appears behind us. We turn around. The Australian flag waves at the highest point on the ship, waving freely in the wind, with a pomp all its own” (62). *Australia*, the symbol of hope and freedom, materialises as an ominous presence, foreshadowing brutal power. Ironically, the emblem of that power is the Australian flag, flying freely on the mighty ship behind them. Now begins the assault on humanity—the destructive processes of dehumanisation, enacted under the repressive authority symbolised by that flag.

The tedium of *waiting* is a recurring motif in the subsequent narrative, reinforcing a concern with the erosion of temporal awareness. Each boat odyssey has founded a new imagined “nation” among those who shared the journey. Yet the enforced waiting that is part of their daily life on Manus has the power to throw each back into to the “dusty remnants” of his individual past. An “internal odyssey” is thus formed, in counterpoint to the group identities forged in collective waiting, while hope was still

alive (131). This theme of *waiting* joins a broader concern with the sense of time and also that of place, which are central to the book’s structure. The sense of futurity, which had been bound up with hope, is especially affected by this erosion of consciousness.

A succession of thwarted hopes allows the future to take on ghostly appearances throughout the narrative. After a PNG court finds the detention centre to be illegal, apprehension of the future takes on a new form. Fear of prolonged detention in “Manus Prison” is subsumed into that of a different form of incarceration—involuntary permanent resettlement on the island. Individually remembered wars in their countries of origin now merge in the collective anticipation of the violence that will follow the duplicitous closing of the detention centre. Past horrors encroach on anxious anticipation of the future.

“Retreat to Nature” and the Sense of Exile

The merging of past and future is enacted also in a recurring motif of lost places—a theme of exile, associated with solitary retreat in situations of stress or anxiety about some impending challenge. That theme can seem at first to accord with an attitude towards the natural world familiar within a European sensibility shaped by Romanticism. The narrator appears to seek solace or tranquility in immersion in Nature. However, those interludes sometimes unfold in ways that can have a further resonance for a more specifically *Australian* readership. The descriptions of local landscape, which provide their immediate settings, are overlaid on less accessible evocation of other scenes—emotionally charged memories of lost places, which are reconstructed through imagination. What appears to be immersion in a place actually present is also an articulation of exile—an attempted re-connection with a different place left behind.

Some of these episodes involve a hidden place, offering a perspective from above on events unfolding below. They may involve a spatial shift, eliciting a jolt into another mode of consciousness—a mental state into which the reader cannot always fully enter. It is as if the sense of place here enters a new configuration with that of time, in a surfacing of consciousness of exile. The present landscape evokes reminiscence on very different remembered locations—scenes of mountains and chestnut oaks, perhaps, rather than the lush Manus vegetation. Those interludes can then seem to involve a shift from the rawness of depicted trauma to something akin to “myth.” There is something more complex here than a relatively straightforward evoking of memories associated with—but separable from—present perception. The state communicated is more like *reverie*, in which memory and perception run together.

In one such episode in Indonesia, before the departure of the second boat, the narrator recounts early morning walks to a picturesque field in the depths of a nearby plantation. The walks are pervaded by fear of discovery of his illicit presence, but also with a sense of hope carried by the thought of impending movement towards Australia. The retreat reflects a state of consciousness caught between different places. It reverberates in later scenes on Manus, in which memories of earlier asylum in Kurdish mountain areas mingle with apprehension of impending danger. The felt need for refuge comes full circle. In related passages, the narrator speaks of a kind of hopelessness associated with diaspora: a sense of separation from all that is familiar.

To an Australian reader such passages may resonate with familiar Romantic connotations of “Nature” as inspiring awe at the Sublime or solace in solitude. Yet there are resonances also of something else, which can be more specifically associated with Australia. For there is a sense of

exile which lies deep in modern Australian consciousness; and it too is elicited in response to "Nature." The theme of exile speaks to layers of the complex and troubled sense of "being Australian."

Those who arrived on the early Fleets from Britain came from a diversity of culture and class, all leaving behind familiar loved places. Until fairly recently, it was commonly believed that early Europeans in Australia construed an unfamiliar landscape through a European gaze, recasting its strangeness to conform with memories of what had been left. Hence the oddly European look of much early colonial artistic representations of land and fauna.

In relation to landscape, that notion of a reconstruction of the unfamiliar has more recently been challenged by Australian historians and archaeologists. Rather than seeing through a European lens, early settlers who left written journals of their perceptions may in fact have been seeing the product of aeons of Indigenous land management. When some of them reported that a terrain had the look of the carefully crafted contours of the estates of "fine gentlemen," they were indeed seeing it through the lens of a familiar class system. Yet they were perhaps also offering an accurate description of what they saw at the time—not "wilderness," but land shaped by a human presence vastly longer than they were capable of imagining.

It is only in recent times that Australian consciousness has begun to engage with the deep sense of exile carried by Indigenous Australians as strangers on their own land. Such a sense of "exile"—the depth of which lies largely beyond the reach of non-Indigenous consciousness—is rooted in different ways of construing relations to "country." Long histories of accumulated knowledge of the land, of its ways and its needs, are embodied in Indigenous culture—in its languages and its stories.

"Exile" can involve feeling cut off, not only by spatial displacement, but by separation from the ways that places are shaped by specific human presence—from a distinctive union of the "natural" and the "human." For non-Indigenous Australians such a sense of exile involves a "lost" past which is a mere wrinkle in time in comparison to the deep time of Indigenous presence. Yet a European consciousness can be imbued with its own forms of the pervasion of the "natural" with human presence.

The contours of a Greek landscape can be shaped in imagination by the ancient Greek dramas for which they provided a setting—even for those who have never visited Greece. There is of course a world of difference between such humanisations of landscape and the integration of knowledge and land in Indigenous imagining. Yet, even within non-Indigenous Australian consciousness, there are layers of "exile" reflecting different waves of immigration. Those layers can be stirred when Australian readers—whatever their cultural origins—are confronted with the articulation of exile in refugee writing.

Asylum Seekers and Australian Identity

Talk of "contemporary Australian consciousness"—like talk of "Australian identity"—can summon up a false unity out of multiplicity. It is now commonly acknowledged that "we" are not, even in a narrow sense, *just* 'European.' ("We are one but we are many.") Waves of immigration have yielded an explicit embrace of "multi-culturalism." ("From all the lands on earth we come.") Yet what is non-European continues to be seen as somehow secondary—fitted in around the benchmark of normality. That benchmark has shifted in time, tracking processes of assimilation. The early cultural dominance of "British" over "Irish" Australian was gradually subsumed into "Anglo-Celtic," which contrasted with other forms or

shades of "European." A broadened notion of "Caucasian" has subsequently gained primacy over other varieties of "Australianness"—uneasily co-existing with an idealised egalitarian "multi-culturalism."

What was once "other" has been progressively integrated into a changing benchmark of normality. Yet, as awareness grows of the temporal chasm between Indigenous and non-Indigenous presence—with greater understanding of the deep time and cultural richness of that presence—the more confusing the national myth of Australian "inclusion" becomes. It is, after all, difficult to think of Indigenous Australians coming to be "included" or "embraced"—much less "welcomed"—as new arrivals into the prevailing norm. It is into this as yet unresolved cluster of issues around recognition and sovereignty of Indigenous Australians that the figure of the contemporary "asylum seeker" has been inserted.

It is the "unauthorised" arrivals of refugees—the "boat people," who have come without prior approval—that have proved a challenge to the Australian imagination. Those refugees arriving under official "humanitarian" programmes can be more readily accommodated into the imagined transition from "white" to "multicultural" Australia. Notwithstanding the fact that their "unauthorised" arrival is legitimised under international agreements—and more generally under international law—asylum seekers have in recent years become an anomaly for the prevailing mythology of a nation shaped by waves of immigration.

Critics of current Australian refugee policies may think of "multicultural Australia" as an ideal that is being lost. Yet within that ideal itself there was an implicit structure of power and inequality. Rhetoric of "inclusiveness" bears its own hidden differentials of power. Being the ones that do the "including" involves occupying a position of dominance within the fragile unity of "us." Always, some have been implicitly more "us" than

others. Sometimes the structural inequality surfaces more explicitly—as when those who have been “included” are described as “culturally diverse.” Those who comfortably occupy the benchmark position, it seems, see themselves as immune from being considered “diverse.”

Structures of power and inequality underlie the status quo implicit in understanding who, in modern Australia, is to count as “us.” As one of the most enduring mantras of political rhetoric over recent decades has it: “*We* will decide who comes here and the circumstances in which they come.” *We* will do the including from the privileged position of the status quo. The “uninvited other” represents a challenge to this conceptual privileging of the status quo. The deeper anomaly, of course, is that the dominant “we”—the adjudicators of Australian identity—are, in relation to Indigenous Australians, ourselves “uninvited others.”

A consciously *Australian* reading of *No Friend but the Mountains* must reckon with the unresolved unease which binds the figure of the uninvited asylum seeker to that of those who were made exiles on their own land.

Australian Power: The Two Islands

Although physical brutality features in its narrative, the central focus of *No Friend but the Mountains* is not the occurrence of culpable instances of aberrant violence. It is, rather, the corrosive operations of pervasive *systemic* power. There are underlying structures here, for which no individuals can be held directly responsible—or even located to hear a complaint. The elusive officials at the top of the administrative chain—as well as the ultimate authorities in ever-unreachable Australia—are usually invisible. Yet relentless power is manifest in the twisted logic—or apparent

arbitrariness—of the procedures around which the lives of the detainees are organised.

Processes of dehumanisation form the sad core of the book. Yet this pervasive power—articulated throughout the book as the mentality of “Manus Prison”—does not always admit of clear distinction between oppressors, oppressed and witnesses. Power is internalised in those subjected to it, while corroding also the autonomy of those charged with exerting it, and those who helplessly watch.

Not all are affected in the same way. In some instances, the behaviour of Australian prison guards is satirised in recognisably Australian physique and body language. But there are distortions of humanity visible also in the robotic demeanour of more benign ancillary staff. Even those with cultural affinities with some of the detainees are subject to a corrosion of emotional response—as in the case of the Kurdish translator who responds to them with “simultaneous disdain and empathy” (98).

It is here that *No Friend but the Mountains* crosses into the genre territory of “prison narrative.” Immigration processing centres are, of course, not supposed to be prisons. Yet there can be no doubt that the lives depicted as unfolding—or unravelling—are, in effect even if not in name, the lives of prison inmates. Punitive power permeates the space of this supposed locus of “processing.” The fictionalised—yet ever truthful—constructs through which human interactions are depicted are all caught in the entanglements of that power. For the most part, these constructs are not “characters” of a kind that might be encountered in a novel. They enact patterns of human response, rather than tracking the development of individual characters. Yet these constructs speak to the truth of the effects of punitive power in a prison environment. What was supposed to be a “processing” centre has been transformed into a prison.

The structures of power and inequality underlying these scenarios are imposed from Australia. Even the facelessness of power here seems to have Australian lineaments. *Australia*—the symbol of original hope—unfolds as the figuration of oppressive power. What is *never-to-be-reached* is now experienced also as *ever-present*. “Manus Prison” is not just an immigration detention centre that has undergone a transformation into something malign. It is, more specifically, an *Australian* offshore prison. This is an important element in the *self* recognition at stake for an Australian readership of *No Friend but the Mountains*.

What is confronting here goes beyond the thought that asylum seekers are dehumanised by the aberrant behaviour of fellow-Australians in the course of implementing Australian policies. The book can also elicit for Australian readers a deeper recognition: insight into their own entanglement in those twisted—known-yet-unknown—machinations of power. Self-recognition is, not uncommonly, accompanied by shame. Yet the book itself does not typically castigate, or even lament, individual shameful behaviour. It depicts the operations of an amorphous system, making visible the structures of power which provide the context for the erosion of humanity in the world of “Manus Prison,” and derive their authority from an absent Australia.

There is an additional layer to the book’s depiction of “Manus Prison,” which may be more unsettling. It carries an implicit suggestion that those same structures of oppressive power also underlie, though less visibly, life *within* Australia. While speaking from the lived experience of operations of Australian power located “offshore,” it also offers a reversed perspective on power relations within Australia. The thought is explicitly articulated in Omid Tofighian’s reflections, which accompany the text of *No Friend but the Mountains*. Australia is there presented as itself an “island

isolated in a silent ocean where people are held prisoner” (359). The people on that island hear only the stories they tell one another. Though frustrated by their isolation and incarceration, they have also been taught to accept their predicament.

The reversal of the two islands—Manus and Australia—is of course a rhetorical strategy. Yet it is a telling use of rhetoric for a philosophical purpose. It is no accident that Omid Tofighian’s story of the two islands resonates with the famous image from Plato’s *Republic* of the cave whose occupants see only the shadows on its walls of a reality inaccessible to them. (Tofighian is himself the author of a scholarly book on Plato’s use of myth.) The evocation of Plato’s imagery of the cave serves to connect the analysis of power with issues of truth.

Power can corrupt and corrode. It can also breed an insidious collusion in concealment. It can go unnoticed that prevalent political rhetoric is shaped by a subtle privileging of the status quo in power relations within a society. Some of the political critique embedded in *No Friend but the Mountains* draws on insights from feminist philosophy into the perpetuation of male power and privilege through the imposition of a male norm. Power can be subtler and more insidious than the forms it takes in overt oppression or subjugation. It is at this level of *systemic* power that the book’s depiction of life in “Manus Prison” reaches beyond Manus to structures of inequality within “the other island”—Australia itself.

The story of the two islands is told to reinforce the upshot of *No Friend but the Mountains* as political critique. It also points the reader to a recurring element in the book’s structure, which can go unnoticed. Throughout the whole narrative, there are rhetorical and literary strategies for communicating subtle conceptual points which bear on the collective mentality that underlies and sustains Australia’s refugee policies. Those

strategies speak truth to power—not just in its visible enactment in offshore detention centres, but also in its more diffuse forms, which shape what it now is to *be Australian*.

Being Australian

What, then, is it now to *be Australian*? The events narrated in *No Friend but the Mountains* occurred in the wake of significant changes to Australia’s refugee policies, which intensified trends towards “off-shore” handling of asylum applications. Those changes took effect shortly before Behrouz Boochani’s arrival in Australian waters. However, there have been also a series of related administrative changes, which are relevant to understanding the political import of his book.

Prior to those changes, *asylum seeker* was a transitional category, of temporary—even if lengthy—duration. A newly arrived asylum seeker—regardless of their means of arrival—could transition to the official status of *refugee* on being found entitled to protection. There was then a possible path to citizenship. Following the introduction of temporary protection visas, there is now no such path for those who have arrived “unauthorised” by boat. For them being “not quite Australian” has become “never-to-be-Australian.” What was previously a shifting status in relation to Australian identity, has for them become a permanent exclusion.

The consequences have been drastic—not only for those asylum seekers no longer able to reach Australia, but also for those already here, whose progression to being Australian has been blocked. They remain *in*, but not *of* Australia. There is also the dire situation of those—long detained on Nauru and Manus—who were brought to Australia for medical treatment under the later disallowed “Medivac” legislation, only to remain in indefinite detention *within* Australia.

It may seem that changes in refugee policy are of limited significance in the broader context of Australian attitudes to immigration. Yet these changes rest on a conceptual shift in the understanding of what it is to *be Australian*, which becomes visible in the light of a reflective reading of *No Friend but the Mountains*. *Australia* is now a symbol of the power which denies for many the possibility of a transition from *asylum seeker* to *citizen*. It imposes a stasis on a category of human beings who have sought to come here—legally, though uninvited—in search of survival, freedom or just *a future*. There are new depths here of the sense of exile, as it applies to the experience of being a refugee. To *be Australian* is now to possess an identity which can be withheld from others by the exercise of a collective sense of entitlement, grounded in the dispossession of those who were first here.

Truth, Illusion and Collusion

The shift in Australia's treatment of asylum seekers was initiated by government policy. Yet it could not have happened without the tacit acquiescence of the Australian populace. Its acceptance was facilitated by political rhetoric. "*We will decide who comes here*" has proved a powerful mantra. It has reinforced anxieties about "border security" in a populace fearful of being over-run, while also appealing to a felt threat of "internationalism"—of having national interest subsumed into global decision making. *No Friend but the Mountains* articulates, among much else, the destructive power of the distortion of truth in political rhetoric. Here again the evocative force in the book of imagery of the natural world comes into play. Imagery of moonlight takes on a new significance, in tandem with the changing figurations of Australia as symbol.

Throughout the second boat journey, the moon's appearances and disappearances are disorienting and duplicitous, providing a setting for

fluctuations of fear and hope. Its light is associated with the torturous sense of waiting—with stasis and inertia. However, that magical brightness becomes also an emblem of recognition of the deep truth of human situations, which has the capacity to transform fear. It conjures up a lucidity which can be a source of comfort beneath surface terror.

Clarity of understanding yields a reassurance, deeper than the fluctuations of fear or hope. It brings the possibility of extricating consciousness from the cruel ambiguities and irrationalities of malign power. The narrative gives voice to the experience of disempowerment. Yet it also offers a confident expression of autonomy—in the narrator's reflection that he has, after all, crossed the powerful ocean and survived.

Imagery of clouds—of concealment and sudden breaking insight—plays a similar role. In the narrator's first view of Manus, seen from a descending plane, truth breaks through the duplicitous fictions designed to encourage the detainees to return whence they came, as well as to dissuade others from making similar journeys. "My mind has been moulded by the commentary of the Australian officials," the narrator reports. "They have spent quite some time forming an image of Manus Island in our minds, a savage image of the people, the culture, the history, the landscape" (83). In reality, Manus is beautiful. He reflects, as he first glimpses it, that it looks "nothing like the island hell that they tried to scare us with." It is "an untainted creation of nature" (101).

Duplicitous stories of Manus were fed to the refugees. There have also been myths about the refugees themselves, which have exploited the fears of an anxious Australian populace. Here, too, minds have been "moulded" by political rhetoric. Refugee supporters within Australia might recognise something of their own emotional trajectory on reading a harrowing episode, in which a distraught young man on Manus is

repeatedly denied approval for an out-of-turn phone call for news of his dying father. His friends at first remonstrate with the intransigent guards, attempting to confront them with the human realities of the situation. Eventually, their insistent pleas give way to a helpless shrug: there’s nothing to be done. The transition mirrors a process that has become familiar within Australia, in which vehement protest on refugee issues is gradually worn down. Empathetic response and moral outrage subside into numbed acceptance, a sense of “nothing to be done.”

No Friend but the Mountains articulates both the truth of disempowerment and that of autonomy, enacted in the epic journeys of refugees. Truth can be eclipsed by the rhetorical construction of *asylum seeker* as a threatening figure. It can also be eclipsed in well-meant constructs of *refugee* as abject object of pity or condescension—as a fragile being, in need of “inclusion” by *us*. The book speaks truth both to the rawness of subjugation to power, and to the nobility of unconquered autonomy and empowerment. It also speaks to the corrosion of human potential and creativity in that in-between state—the tortured tedium of waiting.

More generally, an important lesson here may be a new appreciation of the rich array of disparate, but convergent, voices to be found within the genre of “refugee writing.” Those voices articulate experiences through which refugees have become who they are, and their sense of what their future might be. Listening attentively to them might encourage the currently dominant *us* to think of being Australian as itself an ongoing process, rather than a pre-existing essence or identity. Refugee writing facilitates a collective imagining of an Australia-in-the-making,

A complex and emotionally conflicted imagining of *islands* lies deep in the consciousness of modern Australians—emblematic both of self-

contained autonomy and of vulnerability. That imagining pulls against effective engagement with interconnected challenges which lie increasingly beyond purely national solutions—mass movements of people, in a context of climate change; recognition of injustices and inequalities, in the wake of colonial subjugation and dispossession. In an Australian context, *No Friend but the Mountains* speaks powerfully to a troubled sense of an uncertain future, as well as to an uneasy awareness of an unresolved past. For no human being is an island; and perhaps the bell now tolls for *us*.

NOTES

1. Behrouz Boochani. “As I learn to live in freedom, Australia is still tormenting refugees.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, online, May 17, 2020.
2. Behrouz Boochani. *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*. Trans. Omid Tofighian. Melbourne: Picador, 2018, p. 49. Subsequent references to the book are provided in parentheses.