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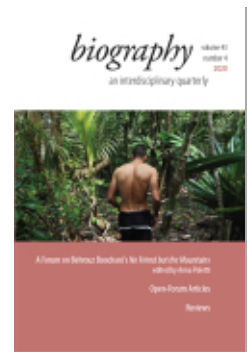
This place really needs a lot of intellectual work: Behrouz  
Boochani's Innovation in Life Writing as a Transnational  
Intellectual Practice

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# “This place really needs a lot of intellectual work”

## Behrouz Boochani’s Innovation in Life Writing as a Transnational Intellectual Practice

Anna Poletti

In what follows, I explore the unique circumstances of the production of *No Friend but the Mountains* and consider the absence from the narrative itself of the very technology that enabled the book’s writing.<sup>1</sup> *No Friend but the Mountains* was largely written contemporaneously with the events it depicts—it is a powerful example of how narrative can be a means of making knowledge about an event as it unfolds. The complete absence of mobile phones from the story, then, makes a kind of strategic sense. Like the slave narratives published in North America to support the abolition of slavery, certain details must be left out of the narrative to protect the practices of resistance that still enable individuals to find freedom from the oppressive conditions the narrative describes. As readers of the story of *No Friend but the Mountains*, we must accept that we cannot know how Boochani came to have a mobile phone, where he hid it, how it was paid for, and how it was replaced when it was confiscated or stolen.

But it is not entirely true to say that mobile phones are absent from *No Friend but the Mountains*. In its original publication in English and in subsequent translations, Boochani’s narrative is bookended by two essays by Omid Tofighian: the first is titled “A Translator’s Tale: A Window to the Mountains,” and it outlines the simultaneous translation of Boochani’s writing from Farsi to English that was undertaken by Tofighian in close consultation with Moones Mansoubi and Sajad Kabgani.<sup>2</sup> The second essay is titled “No Friend but the Mountains: Translator’s Reflections,” and describes in more detail the intellectual collaboration between Tofighian and Boochani that underpinned the book’s composition. These essays make it clear that while *No Friend but the Mountains* is a story that could only be written by someone inside Manus Prison, Boochani’s writing was produced within a relational intellectual and creative network beyond the prison that was sustained

by mobile phones and the global mobile data network. I will return to the issue of how we might understand the peripheral position of the smartphone and the data network in the text momentarily, but first I will present some relevant parts of Tofghian's first essay to give you a sense of how the writing of the book and its translation were intertwined, and the role of digital networked technologies in the process.

My initial conversations with Behrouz were conducted via Facebook, and over time our connection shifted to WhatsApp. Because the connection on Manus Island is so poor we have only been able to text message each other or send voice messages. So there is no direct real-time conversation. Behrouz wrote his whole book (and all his journalism, and co-directed a film) through messaging. Sometimes he would send me his writing directly via WhatsApp text. But usually he sent long passages of text to Moones Mansoubi, a refugee advocate and another of Behrouz's translators, who arranged the text messages into PDFs. Once prepared, Moones would email me PDFs of full chapters. In some cases Behrouz would text me new passages later on to add to the chapters, usually for placement at the end. The full draft of each of Behrouz's chapters would appear as a long text message with no paragraph breaks. It was this feature that created a unique and intellectually stimulating space for literary experimentation and shared philosophical activity. ("Translator's Tale" xvi)

...

In 2015 when Moones began working with Behrouz, the prisoners were under constant surveillance and always in danger of having their mobile phones confiscated. She tells me that there were regular raids during which officers would search for phones. These incursions were brutal and would occur around 4 or 5 am. Rumours always circulated regarding the prison system's plans to conduct a phone search, so refugees lived with constant fear and dread.

Behrouz's first phone was confiscated. For two or three months he would write his book by hand and use Aref Heidari's phone to send voice messages to Moones for transcribing. . . .

Behrouz eventually managed to smuggle in another phone. This time he created a secure hiding spot for the phone as he slept—he inserted the phone into a cavity he made deep within his mattress. The officers did not find his phone again, although his phone was stolen in 2017 and writing was delayed for a short period before acquiring another. There were also periods lasting weeks and even months when Behrouz's personal communication was suspended. During phases of extreme securitisation and surveillance he was forced to leave his phone hidden for long periods. ("Translator's Tale" xxxii–xxxiii)

How are we to understand the paratextual position of mobile media in *No Friend but the Mountains*? What might it tell us about the relationship between new media technologies, the creative, intellectual, and activist work of prison writing as Boochani practices it, and translation?

In my recent research, I have been thinking about the relationship between media technologies and materialities, and the practice of autobiography (Poletti). Building on the work of Katherine Hayles and Lisa Gitelman, I have developed a theory that the media we use to inscribe our lives shape how those lives come to matter. This seems like a fairly obvious thing to say, but life writing scholarship has largely focused on life writing as a cultural practice of narrative undertaken in language, and less attention has been paid to the role of media technologies and their materialities in the construction of meaning about lived experience. I take my lead in thinking about media this way from Lisa Gitelman, who defines media "as socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (7). *No Friend but the Mountains*, it seems to me, is an essential example of how an assemblage of media materialities—the mobile phone, the computer, the global data network, the book—can be brought together by a team of people, can be *rallied* if you like, to make Boochani's life matter in the face of powerful structural, legal, and symbolic efforts to render it irrelevant. For Tofighian and Boochani, WhatsApp was the space of collocation in which translation as a transnational practice of intellectual exchange and activism took place, and the protocols of the phone and the book became a means of countering popular ontologies of representation relating to Australia's system of mandatory indefinite detention of refugees. From within this context, Boochani and his collaborators produced a new and vital account of the unfolding present of immigration detention that is also a work of epistemology—it produces knowledge about the system of immigration detention as a political and social practice drawing on the evidence of lived experience. It vividly depicts the social, psychological, cultural, and ethical consequences of that practice beyond his individual experience.

To use Adrian Piper's phrase, we might consider Boochani-the-author, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist trained in political science, as a *bibliographic subject* with a strong investment in writing as a means to speak truth to power. He is invested in the power of print culture as a means of validating, communicating, contesting, and fixing knowledge about the world. We can only speculate on this based on the description of Boochani as a journalist on the back cover of the book. The narrative of *No Friend but the Mountains* does not explain Boochani's reasons for leaving Iran, or say very much at all about the life he lived before he left the country (Tofighian, "Translator's Tale" xxix–xxx). The narrating "I" of the book looks back to his Kurdish cultural heritage, but not to Iran. Instead he tells us how he barely survives the perilous sea voyage from Indonesia to Australia, and his subsequent entrapment in Australian immigration detention. Yet while we read this narrative, we are also conscious of the writer—who is never narrated explicitly—but who is confined on an island prison that is unknowable because it is legally situated in a communications black hole. The writing bristles with Boochani's intellect and creativity, and hums

with the ingenuity, persistence, and flexibility required to make it, even though the making is hidden from view. Because of Tofighian's essays, we know the mobile phone is a technology that enables the writer, the thinker, to hold on to his identity in the face of the privatizing and dehumanizing logic of the immigration prison—a logic that deploys a raft of legal and symbolic techniques to render the refugee's social death (Patterson 38–39). In extending Orlando Patterson's theory of social death from slavery to the prison, Joshua M. Price summarizes social death as comprising three aspects: being “subject to systematic violence, to generalized humiliating treatment, and to ‘natal alienation’” (5). “Natal alienation” means “in effect, one's family and community ties ha[ve] little or no legal or social standing” (5). Indeed, *No Friend but the Mountains* provides great insight into how Australian immigration detention adopts many of the same principles used by the prison to render the refugee socially dead.<sup>3</sup>

Tofighian's description of the complex network of intellectual engagement, intimacy, and support that is enabled by the mobile phone shows us how mobile technologies were used to resist the natal alienation that offshore immigration detention enacts. The networked technologies enable a dynamic flow of transnational communication and connection. This produces a context in which Boochani's life and identity as a journalist continues to matter. Tofighian's description of the translation process demonstrates that this unique form of transnational writing and translation made use of what new media theorist Wendy Chun describes as the “habitual” forms of use associated with networked technologies (1–10). For Chun, networked media use is repetitive, dispositional (not instinctive), and addictive—distinctly *not representational*. In the production of *No Friend but the Mountains* these factors are central in combatting the natal alienation enacted by immigration detention. Networked media creates a scene of intellectual engagement and emotional support that, while interrupted by the practices of the prison, has an ongoingness that can help Boochani and other detainees with illicit mobile phones evade the systems of domination of the prison. Activists such as Tofighian, Moones, and Janet Galbraith, as well as Boochani's friends in Iran, form a network that spans PNG, Australia, Iran, and Egypt. They use the habitual affordances of networked media technologies to create a mediated holding environment that enables the writing of the book by denying Boochani's social death. I use a concept here (the holding environment) from the psychoanalysis of Donald Winnicott to frame how the writing happens, not to privatize Boochani or make claims about his psychological state. I cannot comment on his need for a therapeutic environment that could make the systematic torture of Manus Prison bearable, although anyone who reads his account of the prison can see that the prisoners were subjected to systematic durational forms of psychological and physical torture, which the book conceptualizes and describes in great detail.

One example of these conditions is provided by the narrator's description and analysis of the use of queues in the prison. In Chapter 8, “Queueing as Torture: Manus Prison Logic / The Happy Cow,” Boochani elucidates queueing for food

and for access to the telephone room in the prison as key techniques of dehumanization. This is one of the few instances where telecommunications are present in the narrative. Official telephones are a limited resource, access to which is used to torment the prisoners. Of the queue for the phones, Boochani writes:

It is impossible to imagine the prison without the pandemonium of the telephone queues. These queues are definitely the most tumultuous. These queues attract more people than any other queue because they form in the telephone room area where the prison population from the three separate sections of Manus congregate.

The telephone room is a large room with seven or eight phones, but several are always broken. . . . The prisoners wait in line from early morning in front of the watchman's kiosk. Then, after the officer reads out the numbers, groups of a few people enter the telephone room. They launch in on the phones like hungry lions. They aren't aware which phones are busted. The attack has to be fierce; the prisoner only has time to test his phone quickly. If it is broken, he has to find another.

On many occasions two savvy prisoners realise their phones are broken right at the same time and at once set on the phone in the corner. One grabs the handset, one grabs the base. Then a tough struggle ensues, and the telephone might split in half, or the one who is less powerful might withdraw from the conflict. Like a wild creature that relinquishes its prey, he retreats to the corner and kicks and punches the wall. Some occasions end with sparks flying and fights starting. There are always a few heavy-built officers standing there ready to use violence to separate the two. Out of a group of seven or eight individuals, just a few find functioning telephones. Demoralised, with nerves on edge and nothing to show for his efforts, he returns to the prison. He accepts defeat, or begins to queue again. A wasted day.

The whole thing can be described like this: two officers stand at the front of the line, one of them completely vigilant and watching over the numbers as they pass the gate, another calling out the order of numbers at short intervals and matching the image on the identity cards with the person entering. Then the two officers behind the gate open the lock. After the group enters the telephone room the officers lock the gate again. The role of the officer standing there is to keep locking and unlocking the same gate the whole time he is on duty. Imagine after a day at work the partner of that same officer asking him something like, 'Sweet-heart, what did you get up to today?' If he is at all honest he would answer, 'Darling, today from morning till afternoon I unlocked and locked a gate dozens of times, and now I can finally be in your arms.' (218-19)

This excerpt is a good example of Boochani's use of black humor and stock characters to evoke the distinctive features of the social world of the immigration prison. His meticulous description of the mechanics of access to the telephone

room bears witness to the queue as a technique of domination and dehumanization—the length of the description transferring to the reader the requirement to be patient, to submit to the banality and the arbitrariness of the prison’s techniques of biopower and the narrowing effect this has on the prisoner’s social being. The tight controls over access to resources force the prisoners into competition, in turn shaping to what degree they can form social bonds to counter the impact of the social death imposed by their imprisonment and the replacement of their names with numbers. What sort of community is possible if your opportunity to speak to your family directly affects the chances I will have to speak to mine?

The narrative we read is evidence of how the use of illicit mobile phones disrupts the prisoner’s social death in two ways. Illicit mobile phones reduce the competition for scarcely available resources of communication between prisoners. In Boochani’s case, it also allows him to continue his work as a journalist and writer. In the face of the systematic and symbolic production of social death, refugees and activists turn to digital technologies as a form of resistance to counter the transnational exclusion of the refugee from the social field. This exclusion is threefold: they have left their homes and are thus separated from their loved ones and their cultures; they are imprisoned in an isolated environment that is hidden from view and is a communications black hole, that is neither Australia nor PNG; and they are not recognized by the country to whom they wish to address their claim for asylum. The transnationally mediated holding environment created by mobile phones—and the activists who fundraise to pay for the people on Manus and Nauru to have access to the telecommunications network—is a reparative gesture aimed at countering the Australian state’s violence.<sup>4</sup> As confirmation of the power of the mobile phone to counter immigration detention as a technology of social death, in October 2020, the Australian Minister for Immigration attempted to reinstate the ban on mobile phones in detention centers on the Australian mainland after it was overturned in 2018 (Karp).

Thus, Tofighian’s account of the logistics and challenges that Boochani and his supporters faced in supporting his writing is a central element of the account of Manus Prison that *No Friend but the Mountains* provides. It evidences the unique transnational, mediated assemblage that needed to form around the imprisoned writer, journalist, and intellectual so that he could do the work he needed to do. The collective process of simultaneous translation of Boochani’s writing, his rejection of his status as a representative subject, his deft use of characters within the narrative, and the paratextual essays trouble privatizing modes of reading that seek an encounter with a singular subject of suffering. This tells us, perhaps, something about how networked media can be used to make a single life matter, so that a single subject can undertake the intellectual and creative work of demanding recognition for the value of the lives held in abeyance in immigration detention.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the students of the 2019–2020 course “Core Theories and Current Debates in Comparative Literary Studies” at Utrecht University for this discovery, and for the subsequent conversations in our seminars that helped me refine my understanding of the importance of this absence.
2. See also Mansoubi.
3. The intrusive form of social death, Patterson explains, incorporates the socially dead person as “the permanent enemy on the inside” who “did not and could not belong because he was the product of a hostile, alien culture” (39)—although what constitutes “inside” and “outside” is precisely the point of contestation in offshore immigration policies, and especially in Australia’s case, where large portions of national waters have been excised from the immigration zone in order to make claiming asylum in Australia more difficult.
4. See the work of the organization Gifts for Manus and Nauru: <https://giftsformanusandnauru.org.au/mobile-phone-credit/>.

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