
Book Review: Kayla Kaszas

“No Friend but the Mountains” is an autobiographical account of Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani’s illegal six-year detainment on Manus Island, a migrant detention center off the coast of Australia. Formally known as the “Manus Island Regional Processing Center” the detention center was commissioned on behalf of the Australian government for the purpose of intercepting asylum seekers before they could reach the shores of Australia to claim refuge. Never persecuted of any crimes, asylum seekers were held like prisoners in grossly inadequate conditions, while being told that the Australian government was “processing” their request for asylum. Boochani’s work, written on a smuggled cell phone and translated one “WhatsApp” message at a time, serves an eyewitness account of these experiences and the atrocities detainees were subjected to at the hands of the Australian government. This, therefore, makes both the book’s content and by extension, its very existence an effective act of defiance against these dehumanizing migration regimes as it exposes the systemic torture Boochani sees as integral to the detention system. To this end, Boochani comments on themes of identity, individualism, and humanity, which he sees as being systematically removed from the migrant experience, while at the same time critiquing the weaponizing of the border by the state.

The book opens with Boochani, fleeing political persecution due to his work as a journalist, and his fellow asylum seekers travelling to a boat that waits to take them to Australia. Battling starvation, stormy waters, and the desperation of his fellow passengers, Boochani describes his near-death experience as giving him a newfound appreciation of life. But this is, of course, short-lived. Boochani’s journey ends with the boat capsizing, leaving him and the surviving passengers to be rescued by the Australian Coast Guard who then take them to the migrant detention center on Manus Island. From the point of his detainment onward, the book reads almost like an anthology, with every chapter working to describe a different aspect of detainment including: starvation, loneliness, and the often-self-destructive ways detainees come to cope with their circumstances. Most notably however, Boochani describes the mundane, repetitive existence that becomes his life, and the degrading treatment he and his fellow detainees are subjected to at the hands of the prison guards and the Australian state. Here, he speaks of being “forced to straddle the border between human and animal” in relation to both the lack of determinacy he now has over his life (232), and the physical conditions he is subjected to, including; cramped living quarters, the continuous smell of body odor, and the excitement all the prisoners seem to experience over a single piece of food. He begins to describe himself as a “piece of meat with a mind that is always moving between the darkest, dullest, and most worn-out scenes” (131), entering a state of “non-being” he thought he had escaped when he survived the journey to Manus.

It is in this state of hopelessness, that book’s main themes can be found, as asylum seekers are stripped of their identity, individualism, and humanity, in an effort by the Australia to deter them from seeking refuge within the Australian state borders. As stated by Boochani, the border is a system in which the state “create terms to establish and reinforce their power” (393). By controlling the border, the state in turn controls the very lives of those that seek to pass through it, consciously stripping them of autonomy, in seeming opposition to the liberal values states like Australia often claim to embody. This becomes most obvious when after months in the
prison, the Australian government finally sends immigration lawyers to begin processing individual asylum cases. Though the prisoners are led to believe that this is the first step to gaining asylum in Australia, they are later informed that their only options for quick release is to be deported back to their home country, or to apply for refuge in Papua New Guinea, as this is the state upon which the detention center resides. Here, it becomes evident that the Australian government is using the detention center as a means of controlling the flow of migrants over the border, taking advantage of their precarious citizenship as a means to limit their rights and incentivize their return to their home state.

It is the response to such systems that Boochani conceives the purpose of his work as being not only a tool for exposing such injustices, but also for resistance. As described in the book’s foreword, “everything has been done… to dehumanize asylum seekers. Their names and stories are kept from us… Their lives are stripped of meaning” (IX) Thus, by retelling the stories of the prisoners on Manus Island, Boochani works to bring humanity back to their experiences, by giving them an individual identity. Here, it should be noted that though they are all based on real people, the characters in Boochani’s work are ultimately manufactured as composites to protect the identities of individual detainees who may be in a position of vulnerability. Thus, as stated in the book’s disclaimer, all characters are “a collage based on various events, multiple antidotes, and are often inspired by the logic of allegory.” Through this, Boochani can use his writing as a tool of resistance, with this being most notable in the naming of his characters. Throughout the book, characters are referred to either by a distinct physical characteristic or a personality trait. Here, Boochani claims that “naming is a way of reclaiming authority from the prison” by giving each character a name that denote an aspect of their identity, in direct opposition to a system that seeks to strip that identity from them. Examples include ‘the Gentle Giant,’ ‘Maysam the Whore’ and ‘the Prophet.’

With its main purposes of exposing the Manus prison system, critiquing the weaponization of the border by states, and being a tool for resistance in mind, “No Friend but the Mountains” is ultimately successful in its endeavours. Its greatest strength lies within Boochani’s first-hand account of these atrocities, in which he is not only able to relay what he witnessed in terms of other detainees, but also give the audience insight into his psyche, a chilling feat that not many scholarly books can accomplish. He describes the “meaningless cycles of repetitive struggles” (131) his life has become and explains to the reader that only those who are creative can survive. Armed with this knowledge, it is not hard to see how during his detainment, Boochani may have found solace in writing this book, this again, only adding to its function as a tool of resistance. To this extent, the book serves as important insight into the lived experiences of migrants that so often go under analyzed especially within discussions of state power and responsibility. Through his work, Boochani offers his readers an unwavering look at where values of freedom and liberty end for states that so proudly claim to uphold them, and the precariousness of the so called ‘citizenship’ many of us continue to leave unexamined.