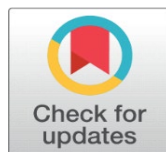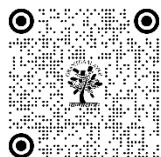# MEMORY, NOSTALGIA AND EXILIC IDENTITY IN BEHROUZ BOOCHANI'S NO FRIEND BUT THE MOUNTAINS

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ABSTRACT

Behrouz Boochani's No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison (2018) exemplifies the resilience of memory and nostalgia in the face of systemic oppression. Written under extreme duress and mediated through digital communication, the text serves as both an act of survival and a cry of resistance. This paper explores the interplay of memory, nostalgia and digital media in Boochani's narrative, focusing on how these elements subvert censorship, preserve cultural identity, and challenge dehumanisation. Memory operates as a vital means of reconstructing identity, resisting erasure and preserving the collective experiences of Kurdish culture. Boochani's fragmented recollections reflect the trauma of exile while simultaneously asserting his humanity against the mechanised cruelty of Manus Prison. Nostalgia, often tied to his homeland and traditions, becomes a double-edged sword—offering solace whilst exposing the profound loss of displacement. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, the analysis examines how Boochani critiques both his current plight and the broader conditions of statelessness. Boochani's use of WhatsApp to compose and transmit the text highlights the potential of technology to amplify marginalised voices and document resistance in real-time. The fragmented structure of the narrative mirrors its digital genesis, challenging conventional literary forms whilst underscoring the urgency of Boochani's message. No Friend But the Mountains is seen as a profound literary intervention, intertwining memory, nostalgia and digital resistance to confront the violence of displacement and detention.

Keywords: Digital Media Censorship, Exilic Identity, Memory as Resistance, Reflective Nostalgia, Social Media, Trauma and Survival

1. INTRODUCTION

Published in 2018, Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison* is a powerful work that explores themes of memory, censorship and the use of digital media as a form of resistance. The text was originally written in Farsi in the form of text messages on a mobile phone and smuggled out of Manus Island in such a fragmentary state, serving as an example of how artists use the most limited technology available to them to raise voices against suppression and defy censorship (Tofighian). This method of creation highlights the use of digital media as a tool to overcome censorship and bears witness to the harsh realities of the prison. The chapter titled "Translator's Tale: A Window to the Mountains" captures Boochani's experience of 'composing' the book as the "combination of art and thought":

As I was writing I interacted with them regularly, and these conversations influenced the text in terms of its dramatic features and the intellectual positions and themes. As a result the book is a playscript for a theatre performance that

incorporates myth and folklore; religiosity and secularity; coloniality and militarism; torture and borders. (Boochani)

2. MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

Memory and nostalgia serve as pivotal themes in exilic literature especially in narratives that explore forced displacement, cultural erasure and the struggle for identity. Through the recollections of his Kurdish heritage, interspersed with nostalgic reflections as well as the sense of suffering, Behrouz Boochani creatively presents memory and nostalgia as tools for both personal survival and political resistance within the dehumanising confines of Manus Prison. His narrative acts as the mode of active (digital) resistance against the erasure of his cultural identity as his individual identity is endangered. The book, therefore, sets out to answer the question that's a staple of exilic literature: how does one cope with the memories of the past? The answer is not to simply suppress them (at least most of the time) but to weaponise them to fight against the active erosion of one's identity and sense of self. Memory is, thus, not merely a passive act of recollection but an active engagement with identity and history. Boochani's use of memory in *No Friend But the Mountains* serves as a mechanism to counteract the oppressive conditions designed to strip detainees of individuality and humanity. Through vivid recollections of Kurdish culture, landscapes and traditions, Boochani reconstructs a self that resists the homogenising forces of the Australian detention system. For instance, his descriptions of Kurdish communal life and natural landscapes act as counterpoints to the sterile, cacophonous environment of Manus Prison. The text is described by the translator (in the translator's note appended to the text) as an experiment in the genre of "horrific surrealism," and needs to be situated within the flux whose product it is:

Behrouz's book is a contribution to the Kurdish literary tradition and Kurdish resistance. Interpretations need to be situated within the styles and structures that have characterised Kurdish creativity for centuries, collective memories of historical injustice and Kurdish political history, and their relational concepts of being and becoming that are connected to the land. The book is also a significant work of both Australian and Persian literature, but the Indigenous Kurdish ways of being, knowing and doing are the most prominent elements. (Boochani)

Seeing the complexity of the text, the translator goes on to propose a "situated schema for reading" in the translator's note:

"Indigenous Kurdish presence

Evocation

Self-determination

Custodianship

Decolonisation and liberation

Intersectional and transnational rhetoric

Horrific surrealism New knowledges." (Boochani)

Read within this schema, memory allows Boochani to document the collective experience of Kurdish oppression, linking his personal suffering to a broader historical and political context. This collective dimension of memory situates the narrative within the larger framework of Kurdish resistance and survival, transforming the text into a universal statement of endurance against systemic erasure. As Bergson aptly puts it, "Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it" (133). The "art and thought" as Boochani relates is the Bergsonian relationship shared by perception and recollection:

Our perceptions are undoubtedly interlaced with memories, and inversely, a memory ... only becomes actual by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips. These two acts, perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis. (67)

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory is essential in understanding the experience of the survivors of tragic events like the Holocaust (especially of the generation once removed). Boochani's text positions him as the product of a war-torn childhood, as well as the pain and beauty of Kurdish diasporic nationalism. His Kurdish heritage and the history of Kurdish resistance greatly inform his perspective. Analysing the text through a perspective that accounts for the continual presence of the traumatic event and how the sufferers utilise shared knowledge of their culture to resist or delay their suffering, is essential. As is obvious, the protagonist of *No Friend But the Mountains* sees his past as fragmentary as his present, thanks to the ongoing and perpetual nature of his suffering.

I am disintegrated and dismembered, my decrepit past fragmented and scattered, no longer integral, unable to become whole once again. The total collection of scenes turns like pages of a short story, churned through with the speed of light. Growth and development of a lifetime takes place by perpetually traversing from the foundations of family life to our times with friends . . . from friends to other friends . . . from our city to another city . . . to another love . . . and to another life . . . and to another death. (Boochani ch. 10)

As Hirsch sees it: "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). The book uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to blend reality with dreams, re-imagining the natural environment and horrific events. The fragmented narrative structure of *No Friend But the Mountains* is of paramount importance: it mirrors the fragmented nature of memory under traumatic conditions while at the same time, it points towards the act of composition of the book. Boochani's recollections are often disjointed, oscillating between past and present, reflecting the disorientation caused by prolonged detention and exile. This fragmentation underscores the difficulty of maintaining a coherent sense of self in an environment designed to dismantle individuality: "I always felt I would die in the place I was born, where I was raised, where I have spent my whole life till now. It's impossible to imagine dying a thousand kilometres away from the land of your roots" (Boochani ch. 1).

However, this fragmented structure also highlights the resilience of memory as a narrative tool. Despite the psychological toll of detention, Boochani's memories persist, refusing to be silenced. This persistence reflects the broader theme of survival in the face of systemic dehumanisation. By exploring memory and nostalgia, Boochani transforms his personal narrative into a powerful act of resistance.

3. NOSTALGIA AND THE EXILIC EXPERIENCE

Serving as a reminder of the humanity that oppressive systems seek to deny, Boochani's recollections ensure that his voice (and by extension, the voices of countless other detainees) remains heard. This dual function of memory and nostalgia, as both personal solace and political defiance, forms a crucial foundation for the narrative's resistance to erasure. For Svetlana Boym, Nostalgia "is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). As against utopian escapism, nostalgia is a more complex system with multiple directions and trajectories: "Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgia feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space" (xiv). Boym goes on to talk about two kinds of nostalgia: "Restorative nostalgia" which "stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (xviii). On the other hand, "[r]eflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming-wistfully, ironically, desperately…. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (xviii). Reflective nostalgia thus allows individuals to resist cultural erasure by holding onto the memory of traditions, places and experiences that oppressive systems attempt to negate or devalue. Reflective nostalgia is not a romanticisation of one's past but a weaponisation of the baggage that acts as a language to an individual. In the words of Boym, it "is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (xv).

Nostalgia, particularly reflective nostalgia as theorised by Svetlana Boym, plays a complex role in *No Friend But the Mountains*. Reflective nostalgia acknowledges the impossibility of returning to a lost home or past, yet it uses this longing to critique present injustices. Boochani's nostalgic reflections on his homeland and culture highlight the profound dislocation he experiences in Manus Prison. However, rather than romanticising his past, Boochani uses nostalgia to emphasise the inhumanity of his current situation and the violence of displacement. Amid the ongoing suffering and trauma, Boochani takes recourse to his past: "Let me say something; let me surrender myself to the realm of the imagination and amnesia" (ch. 10). He goes on reassuring himself by questioning his roots: "Where have I come from? From the land of rivers, the land of waterfalls, the land of ancient chants, the land of mountains. Better to say I've come down from the summits. I've breathed in the ether up there. I've laughed up there." (ch. 10). His memories of Kurdish storytelling traditions and music underscore the cultural richness that contrasts starkly with the erasure and isolation imposed by the detention system. He is not being an escapist; these flights of imagination are deeply political, asserting the value of a culture that the prison system seeks to suppress. For Boochani 'going home' does not mean going back to

Iran: "When looking back at the situation I had departed, I feel a deep sense of hopelessness. My past was hell. I escaped from that living hell. I'm not prepared to think about it, not even for a second" (ch. 4). However, it's by preserving his cultural memory through nostalgic reflections, that Boochani resists the psychological and cultural erasure intended by his oppressors. The text, therefore, resists a simplified definition or categorisation since it is a rather complex exploration of the experience of imprisonment, interspersed with passages of self-reflective poetry and philosophical musings. Boochani has been praised for "employ[ing] the journalism skills and political analysis" (Tofighian 532) in bringing forth a text that problematises the concept of writing itself. For Boochani the experimentation foregrounds experiences that would otherwise be impossible to bring forth in traditional linear narratives: "This is what is so fascinating about the text. It brings all these together with a particular philosophical trajectory…. Reconstructing voice taught me something special… both employing and deconstructing writing structures taught me more about the prison" (533). The text combines myth and legend with tales from his own imagination and psychoanalytic examinations of people. The book also includes dream visions, flashbacks and flash-forwards, all of which contribute to a surreal quality. Tofighian sees it as "rich with multiple narratives" (Boochani) that reach back in time. Talking about the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time that Boochani* shot on his phone, Omid asserts that "[h]is identification and critique of the system in the prison is deeply tied to his Kurdish heritage and the different forms of Kurdish resistance that make up his vision of the world and his understanding of politics" (Boochani et al. 2). The literary merit of the book is in its storytelling and, thus, the transformation of fears, resistance, hope and resilience into a narrative which Boochani liberally dashes with imagination and allegory. By doing this, Boochani is able to raise questions regarding the functioning of literature as well as how discourse functions (or dysfunctions). Talking about his "contempt for journalists" and how he resists being gazed at, Jayne Persian asserts:

> Instead Boochani, a keen observer, has created a fine ethnographic study of the boat journeys and then the Kafkaesque carceral conditions, interspersed with passages of self reflective poetry. He re-names the Centre 'Manus Prison', a prison which works on 'Kyriarchal Logic' (p. 126), taken from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 'theory of interconnected social systems established for the purposes of domination, oppression and submission'. (2)

Boochani describes his memories of the sea rescue as "like a scene from a film consisting of a few frames, separated from one another but interconnected," suggesting a cinematic quality to his memory (Boochani ch. 2). In order for him to be able to make his readers understand his sufferings in the detention centre, Boochani even creates his own language and terminology, using the term "Kyriarchal System" to describe the system of domination and control in the prison. As Tofighian explains in the "Translator's Tale":

> The Kyriarchal System is the name Behrouz gives to the ideological substrata that have a governing function in the prison; it is a title denoting the spirit that is sovereign over the detention centre and Australia's ubiquitous border-industrial complex. The Farsi term system-e hākem could also be translated as 'oppressive system', 'ruling system', 'system of governmentality' ('governmentality' is used in the book to describe particular applications of the system) or 'sovereign system'. (Boochani)

Boochani deliberately avoids using the language of policy, such as "immigration detention centre," opting instead for "prison," and describes people as "trafficked" or "kidnapped" rather than transported. He renames the detention centre as "Manus Prison." He also renames characters in a poetic way, which further challenges the dehumanization inherent in the system:

> This whole system is designed to take our identities and reduce us to just some numbers. So, I want to rename people; to give them names in a poetic way. These are not simple names; I name characters and things in the book in a poetic way to challenge this system and the challenge the language of this system. This is not only the case in the book, I do this with the terms I use in my journalism articles. I don't use the language of the government. (Boochani and Tofighian 19)

4. DIGITAL MEDIA AND RESISTANCE

The process of creation of the book involved the assimilation of textual fragments typed on the phone Boochani procured and sent as text messages to Moones Mansoubi. The process, as explained by Tofighian, deserves to be quoted in full:

> 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. (Boochani)

Boochani also used a mobile phone to take videos which became his co-directed film, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. The poor internet connection on Manus Island meant that there was no real-time conversation; the book as well as the film were created through the phone. Boochani also used social media to report on the conditions of the prison (Boochani et al. 2). Boochani's use of social media can also be interpreted as motivated by his "contempt for journalists." Yochai Benkler in his *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) suggests that the "networked public sphere" allows for decentralised communication that finds it easy to circumvent censorship. Mainstream media is often controlled by a few large corporations or state actors with hidden (or manifest) agendas, limiting freedom of expression. On social media, communication can flow freely among individuals and small groups, without the need for intermediaries like publishers, broadcasters or government entities. Digital media, according to Benkler, creates a "commons" of information that is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, making it much harder for authorities to control or restrict access to knowledge. Accordingly, the "newly emerging sector of peer production that is making it possible to advance human development through cooperative efforts in both rich countries and poor" (Benkler 15) makes such knowledge accessible (as free-to-use) and fosters collaboration among people without reliance on traditional technologies or channels. The internet allows individuals to collaborate on the creation of content, without the need for centralised ownership or hierarchical management. Because the production and dissemination of information are not controlled by any one entity, this form of production, based on open-source models, where knowledge and resources are shared freely among participants, makes censorship significantly more challenging. Instead, they emerge from a network of individuals, each contributing in a decentralised way. Ngwainmbi draws a parallel between the "Muslims in the Middle East, Far East, Asia, and other parts of Africa" in 2021 with access to the internet (especially social media) and how "pop culture in Muslim Hausa land in Nigeria from the years 1953," (362) acted as a platform for the youth to raise their voices against the oppression perpetrated by the occupier:

> Those populations passionately utilize Facebook, Instagram, Spotify, Twitter, and other platforms for various purposes, including learning about young people in other countries, change their appearance, find employment, or voice their views about political trends in their country and elsewhere…. Young people used social media to mobilize themselves against repressive regimes and hold public demonstrations to push for social and economic reforms. Of course, uprisings and resistance to policies deemed repressive have caused digital news media agencies worldwide to intensify coverage in those regions, raising fears of "spying" on the local population. (362)

5. CONCLUSION

Boochani's text is the epitome of decentralised production and dissemination. This decentralisation is a form of resistance to censorship because it distributes power across many different nodes in the network, making it harder for authorities or corporations to exert control. Despite being physically isolated on Manus Island, Boochani was able to share his narrative with the world, not through traditional media outlets, but through a network of digital platforms that are difficult to censor or control. His story, as well as the broader resistance to the policies of offshore detention, was amplified through these decentralised channels.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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