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Authors	Galbraith, Janet
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A Reflection on *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*

Janet Galbraith

Abstract: *Janet Galbraith appears in the film* Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time *(Behrouz Boochani and Arash Kamali Sarvestani, 2017) and was also instrumental in facilitating the filmmaking process. She is the only Australian featured in the movie and used her privileges as a citizen to smuggle some significant footage from Manus Island to Australia where it was uploaded for codirector Kamali Sarvestani to access. In this paper, Galbraith recounts important features of the filmmaking process by employing different genres and styles of writing: she offers recollections of her time collaborating with Boochani, actors and supporters; her interpretation of the significance of the film; and critical analysis of Manus Island's colonial history and Australia's neocolonial machinations. What Galbraith produces here foregrounds issues such as gender, race, privilege and the various structural forms of oppression and exclusion limiting Boochani's resistance and creative work.*

Unseen waves wash, the screen is black with white words. An almost static image appears, blue ocean shored by lush green growth. Bells toll, birds fly, and the incongruous sound of a solo cello inserts itself into the scene. Children laugh. The camera pulls back. Wire fences appear. The soundscape for a moment beats as a heart, or perhaps boots. And so the film, Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time *(2017), codirected by Behrouz Boochani and Arash Kamali Sarvestani, begins.*

Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time was filmed on a mobile phone inside Manus prison, in what Researchers against Black Sites term a "black site" that Australia has created in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). Its codirector and cinematographer, Kurdish writer, journalist, and now filmmaker, Behrouz Boochani, was and is incarcerated by Australia in this black site under Australia's punitive policy, Pacific Solution II. Boochani filmed clandestinely inside the prison and then, after April 2016, once the Supreme Court of PNG had ruled the prison unconstitutional and the inmates were able to venture into the nearby town of Lorengau, Boochani filmed beyond the prison's boundaries. With slow and at times no Internet access on the island, he went to great lengths to send the footage out to Iranian-Dutch filmmaker, editor and codirector, Arash Kamali Sarvestani, living in the Netherlands. The movement of this footage involved various women friends/advocates with citizen privilege who carried it out of PNG to Australia to send to Kamali Sarvestani. The film garnered much interest and was screened internationally in renowned film festivals (Zable). *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* is an unimaginably huge feat.

How do I write about a film that I am intimately involved in, not only as (non)actor but as witness to process, as one of those who carried the footage across nation-state borders, as viewer? I feel the heat of the Manus sun, the scents of lush growth and sea, of papaya and sweat move into my body… remembered voices, touch of people I love. Visceral memories.

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On the film's release, Boochani and Kamali Sarvestani called for the public to view this film as a work of art, rather than as documentary-as-unmediated-unconstructed-reality (Minh-Ha 26). They hoped that this film would be understood as a record of "Manus Prison" through a creative form (Boochani). Boochani explained to me that after many years of working as a journalist within Manus prison, and collaborating on various documentaries, nothing had changed: "I have often said that the language of journalism is too weak to describe the reality in this prison" (qtd. in Capobianco). He felt that journalistic forms, which have traditionally relied on documentary proof and evidence to undermine power structures, had not been able to shift the world's response to Manus prison. The privileging of documentary proof and evidence simply asserted truths countered by other truths, reinstating already circumscribed readings of those most affected by the immigration detention regime. In a private conversation, Boochani told me: "I believe that it is through creative resistance that we can keep our identity and individuality as a human in front of this system".

Any creative work of resistance must take into account "who speaks for whom, how images and sounds are coded and what type of social relationships they make possible or deny" (Richardson). Following Hito Steyerl, Maria José Pantjoba-Peschard suggests that "the political strength of the documentary form lies [in] the way […] content is put together, articulated and presented", rather than in the presentation of facts and the accumulation of evidence, both of which are "procedures of certification" that are inextricably linked to "hierarchical structures of power" (121). In *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, an imprisoned journalist (Boochani) is constantly pushed by a journalist in Australia (myself) to obtain "evidence" and "documents" so that her editor will publish a story on the torture cell inside Manus prison (perversely named after a local bird, the Chauka, which holds multiple meanings for the locals). Viewers hear and see the imprisoned journalist request documentation and interview fellow inmates as they speak about their experiences inside Manus prison. As the film progresses and the stories open out, the absurdity and partiality of privileging documentary evidence is brought into relief. The viewer is invited to listen and look beyond the facts and figures used to obfuscate the ideology that underpins the prison. We can no longer ignore the "broader experiences of being and beings" affected by this regime (Pantojba-Peschard 127).

One of the forms/techniques used by the filmmakers is that of disjunctive montage. Footage of the imprisoned journalist moving through the prison is interspersed with other images and sounds. These images and sounds often surprise the viewer. For example, a man with a mask carries a machine that is pumping smoke along the edges of fences behind fences. The sound is like that of a massive mechanical mosquito. After a few seconds, we hear harmonious singing become louder and louder: "Amazing love, I see" (my trans.). Smoke from the machine veils the fences as the song continues. There is discord between what we see and hear. These images and sounds do not seem to fit together. Where are we? What are we looking at? What are we listening to? Such discontinuities emerge often throughout the film, displacing the viewer, preventing us from being able to watch and listen passively. These disjunctive spaces encourage us as viewers to wonder about meaning and its (un)making.

"I am more than this. I am not just a refugee", says K, a poet who has ventured outside the prison to visit with me. He is immaculately dressed, and very, very thin. Tired. We sit together sharing fragments of poetry. Much of his are love poems dedicated to his wife. He loves her passionately. Misses her dreadfully. Like when I am watching the young father in the film, who is repeatedly frustrated by the system that does not allow him to communicate with his family, anger heats my body. K and I rise, go and stand in the rain.

Boochani speaks of how he and Kamali Sarvestani did not wish to use music or sound effects to manipulate viewers into particular emotions (Capobianco). This opens possibilities and responsibilities for new ways of listening. Spoken words (and images) do not simply deliver information. Instead, viewers are asked to go beyond an acquisitive kind of listening. Irina Leimbacher terms this "haptic listening"—a multi-sensory form of listening. I align this with the poetic. Haptic listening "implies embodied attention to—and a bodily taking in of—a voice's textural and emotional qualities as well as the perceived meaning of their words" (298). These qualities are employed manually throughout the film and include techniques where sound is separated from image.

Unsettling. Song untranslated into English; an indescribable pain enters my chest; repetition of images and sounds; extension of time; and the call, over and over, of the Chauka bird. A young man who we have previously seen stroking a cat amongst some yellow daisy-like flowers begins to speak. I close my eyes against the subtitles and hear the movement of his voice, the intonation and music of it. What enters my body is an urgency, particularity—he is saying something of specific import. My senses open further to focus and I hear a tone of disdain. His voice rises and trails off. Tiredness moves through my body. Am I feeling some of his being-ness? I open my eyes and watch the scene again. The sound of his voice, his body, expressions and movements convey spaces of the unsaid.

I am sitting on a verandah smoking and sharing stories with Dorri, a Manusian woman, after she has finished work. Clement Solomon and Poruan Malai, two men of Baluan island, Manus Province, who are also (non)actors in the film, arrive, sit down and grab a smoke. Behrouz and Amir, imprisoned on Manus Island, emerge from a room and join us. Chauka bird is sleeping, fireflies are flitting and frogs are calling through the damp dark. Down the road a thousand men are crowded together on bunk beds. Clement, Behrouz, Dorri and I listen as Poruan speaks of Katam: customs of hospitality and morality. Before bed we discuss tomorrow's filming. Speaking softly, the boundaries of what can be said are shared.

Divisive and dehumanising practices and language produced by the detention regime assign particular functions and positions to refugees, Manusians and those, such as myself, who are part of the settler-colonial state called Australia. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* enacts a refusal of (some) of these practices, not only through its function as a piece of cinematic art, but also through its process. The relationships between men who are imprisoned in the camps and local Manusians have been characterised by segregation and fear borne out of Australian propaganda. Australian officials informed the refugees that the Manusians are primitive cannibals and the Manusians that the refugees are dangerous terrorists (Galbraith). During the making of this film, new social and political relationships were made possible as the film offered a (contingently) alternative space. Pantojba-Peschard argues that political relationships are "based around concern, responsibility, solidarity and partnership towards others" (16). Those of us who became part of the film came together in this way. This does not mean that unequal historical power relations disappeared, nor does it undermine Boochani and Kamali Sarvestani's role in shaping the film and deciding what would be seen and heard and what would not. Rather, I wish to point to how our positions in relation to each other and our growing friendships were multiple and shifting, constitutive of the film and at times constituted by it. Boochani's direction of (non)actors involved providing us with certain guidelines and then filming the result. This meant much of our time was spent together in shared listening. It was a time of learning and unlearning as we collaborated in solidarity, hoping that this work of cinematic art would disrupt some of the coercive and violent narratives mobilised to divide us,

narratives that serve to uphold the neocolonial violating presence of Australia in Manus, as well as the detention regime more generally.

Much of the power of the film lies in what remains unsaid; new dialogues opened across, and were inflected by, intersecting geopolitical, racialised, colonial and gendered histories. Some of what is left out of the frame is represented by the absent presence of women in relation to the detention regime. The only woman who speaks in the film is me and the only other women seen in the film are unnamed Manusian women dancing and laughing at an Independence Day celebration. The women who prepared food and drinks, cleaned and provided accommodation during the making of parts of the film are placed outside of its purview. The effects of Manus prison on Manusian women are seldom thought about outside of PNG, but cannot be overestimated.

We jump in the truck. Clement is driving. I sit beside Clement, given the place of privilege, front seat—a result of my whiteness. Josie, who is married to Clement, sits in the back seat beside Behrouz who leans forward with his cell phone, filming. I am nervous, and lose the relaxed sense I usually have with Josie and Clement, partly because I would rather be sitting with Josie, and partly because the camera is on me! We stop off at Poruan's place, Clement calls out to him. Behrouz jumps in the back of the truck. Poruan jumps in there too, sits with arms spread wide either side, talks, storying and laughing. Looking around. Behrouz sits facing him, listens, phone held as still as possible, film, stop, film again, stop, film.

Early in the film, a voice, not attached to a body on the screen, says: "life was reduced to being filmed, being watched by officers, harassment, beating". Surveillance remains a constant experience in Manus prison. Filming is not allowed by the refugees within the prison. Boochani, however, has taken hold of a camera and turned his (and our) gaze onto a system that aims to reduce the imprisoned men to what Agamben has called "bare life" (20). Through this creative practice, Boochani (and Kamali Sarvestani) are "composing [on] life in living or making it", and thereby reveal the artifice involved in any form of documentary and representation (Minh-Ha 98). This time, though, the prisoners are not stripped of identity. Instead, personhood is restored. The film does not change their status as non-citizens in relation to the nation state, but rather complicates its concept of citizenship and its dehumanising narratives. State narratives that present refugees as criminals or terrorists do not make sense here; nor do narratives produced by non-refugee advocates that situate refugees as angels or heroes. Through cinematic techniques, collaboration and technology (Bui), as well as his own senses and abilities, Boochani asserts his agency. Solomon and Malai also speak for themselves, asserting their identity, speaking of colonial violence and questioning dominant negative representations: "I don't recognise myself [in Australia's news media]", says Malai.

Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time is a gift, offered to us by Boochani and Kamali Sarvestani, inviting us as viewers to actively engage with the intersecting histories, presences and absences it unveils. We are inextricably involved in negotiating and constructing meaning. Through process and form, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* has instated new contingent political relationships and restored identities and personhood to the detainees and locals of Manus Island. Its poetic presence encourages viewers in the occupied lands called Australia to acknowledge, resist and take restorative action against the injustices shown. We are faced with our own being and our effects on other beings through embodied stories that show us textures of our present history, providing spaces for us to contemplate and imagine beyond this reality. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* is offered to those of us who have rejected our responsibilities

of hospitality; we are called upon to receive this gift and in receiving it to take up our responsibilities as viewers and act.

Acknowledgment

This reflection is dedicated to Poruan (Sam) Malai, a heart friend, who passed away before the final cut. He died of an easily treatable illness because of the ongoing lack of medical care available to Manusian people and refugees in Manus Province.

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Janet Galbraith is a poet, writer and founder of Writing Through the Fences (writingthroughfences.org). Her poetry and articles are published in Australian newspapers, journals and magazines, and broadcast on ABC television and radio. Her poetry collection, *re-membering*, is published by Walleah Press, 2013.