DECOLONISING MULTILINGUALISM: STRUGGLES TO DECREATE

By Alison Phipps

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Reviewed by
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Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate (Multilingual Matters) is a short contribution to decolonisation scholarship from the perspective of non-Indigenous scholar and UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts, Professor Alison Phipps. Brought to fruition by the Writing Without Borders initiative, the book seeks to open dialogue surrounding linguistic decolonisation from a global perspective. It is not an academic text per se, but this is its beauty. Instead, it is a 'series of autoethnographic narratives' (2) about decolonisation from the mind of the author. Poetry is frequently introduced by the author as a way of conveying particular ideas. For this intimate perspective, it is an engaging and interesting read.

The book is comprised of four sections following the introduction. Each stands on its own as an autonomous contribution, although they all link to a broader discussion of decolonisation. A Short Manifesto for Decolonising Multilingualism explicates the author's stance that non-Indigenous scholars must engage in decolonisation and destabilise privilege in their writing, as co-'conspirers' (8). Part 1: Decolonising the Body, recounts a story of healing in Accra, Ghana, to show that decolonisation is about 'the changing of relationships of power, control and dependency' for the sake of 'equality' (23). Part 2: Decolonising the Multilingual Heart explores the author's experience within a family unit in Eritrea, and refugee movements to and from the area. The final section, Part 3: Decolonising the Multilingual Mind, recounts a trip to Aotearoa New Zealand, where the author was introduced to local Māori people. Here, the author reflects on the responsibility of non-Indigenous scholars to share learnings from the communities they visit in consciously respectful ways.

There is much in this book that is welcome – scholars (non-Indigenous ones in particular) have much work to do in giving space to Indigenous scholars, to reject deficit research methods, and to see and untangle themselves from detrimental biases contained within Western scholarship. This book is an honest attempt at doing just this, and many will appreciate the thinking behind its contributions. It is also a welcome break from the confines of contemporary academic writing which, at times, relies so much on citing others it feels limiting to new thought. Language in this book is deliberate and careful, although Indigenous scholars will likely be unnerved by the italicisation of non-English words throughout. This is a writing convention many regard as an 'othering' of languages, and most have ceased to practise this, unless referring to interlingual homographs.

There are some aspects of the book that might surprise some readers and so warrant comment here. Though this book is premised on multilingualism, language frequently takes a back seat for global politics (namely, refugee communities), the tunnel vision of the West, and the thought patterns of the author who is deconstructing such things. Because of this, the book seems to contribute more to the world of decolonising the self, than that of decolonising multilingualism. I expect readers will enjoy this book far more if they approach it expecting the former.

This book seeks to establish more equal power balances in a global diaspora, and that is an important objective. However, I feel the book could have gone a step further. Equality requires more than just working together. The book states that, even after decolonisation, 'it may well be that many of the hierarchies are still intact afterwards, and that the categories of race, gender and class are still doing their work' (23). I am not certain this is enough for Indigenous scholars. Decolonisation for equality or social justice requires the relinquishing of power and, likely, the total destabilisation of those hierarchies. It is only this that allows Indigenous communities to express their own self-determination with that power. This seems more in tune with decolonisation arguments of the current time, and the book would have been more valuable for stating this explicitly.

I did feel also that much of the content is romanticised. The concept of Ubuntu is discussed with considerable dedication in the Manifesto. Part 2 recounts traditional healing in Accra, and Part 3 explores time spent in Murupara, New Zealand. The mystification of various cultures carried the book in some ways, where the facts in the stories alone would have been enough. For those who live in the respective communities and worlds, activities such as healing might be regarded as simple, pragmatic and altogether uninspiring tasks for the day

– they need not have been so mystified. Much of the content is deeply personal and intimate, so perhaps a romantic writing style is justified here. However, since romanticising can be an 'othering' tool of the colonial ethnographical and anthropological academy, many Indigenous scholars read within a frame that will not allow for it.

Decolonising Multilingualism is well worth the read. It will be a thought provoking read for academics and practitioners of any research field who wish to challenge and extend their own thinking and activity, particularly those beginning their own decolonisation journey.

NO FRIEND BUT THE MOUNTAINS: WRITING FROM MANUS PRISON

By Behrouz Boochani, translated by Omid Tofighian,
Sydney: Picador by Pan Macmillan Australia, 2018. 374 pp.
ISBN (print) 978-1-76055-538-2.

Reviewed by
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Kurdish journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani typed out draft sections of this book on a number of prohibited mobile phones, while detained on Australia's Manus Island Regional Processing Centre from 2013. At the time of publication, he was still on Manus. The passages in Farsi were sent via WhatsApp messages to academic Omid Tofighian, who translated them into English in consultation with translators Moones Mansoubi and Sajad Kabgani. This is, in itself, an extraordinary achievement.

Boochani fled Iran to Indonesia and, after surviving a near-drowning in his first attempt to reach Australia, arrived at Christmas Island after being picked up at sea by the Australian Navy on his second attempt. He arrived in July 2013, four days after Kevin Rudd's announcement that 'from now on, any asylum seeker who arrives in Australia by boat will have no chance of being settled in Australia as refugees' (Rudd 2013). Asylum seekers taken to Christmas Island would be sent to Manus and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea for assessment of their refugee status. The book covers this first period, ending with the killing of fellow Kurdish refugee Reza Barati in a riot in February 2014.

Boochani never justifies the decisions that took him to the point of seeking asylum by boat. The most he writes is: 'My past was hell. I escaped from that living hell. I'm not prepared to think about it, not even for a second' (Boochani 2018, 75). He does not give us any insight into the life stories or decisions of his fellow refugees, although he spends some time mulling the motivations and post/colonial conditions of the local guards on Manus Island. This seems to be a deliberate ploy: the book is a study on Boochani's terms, and is not used to argue his case for asylum. Indeed, he shows contempt for journalists: 'intrusive people' who 'take pleasure from shattering the dignity of a human being' (*ibid*, 93–94). Boochani will not add to his humiliation by seeking our permission for his journey.

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' (126), taken from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 'theory of interconnected social systems established for the purposes of domination, oppression and submission' (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009 cited in Boochani 2018, 124). Fellow refugees, Australian guards, and Manus guards are presented as types, or allegorical composite characters. While empathetic, Boochani never presents an idealised fantasy of the refugees; they are not recognisable standardised tropes. In truth, 'they get on my nerves' (*ibid*, 128). Characters include The Blue Eyed Boy, The Toothless Fool, the Irascible Iranian, Maysam the Whore, The Cow, The Smiling Youth and The Hero. Reza Barati appears as The Gentle Giant. Local Manus guards, hired as part of the Australian agreement to use the island as part of the so-called Pacific Solution, are 'Papus', and mostly kind. Interpreters are 'basically amplifiers with consciousness' (Boochani 2018, 315). The Australian guards, many of whom are ex-servicemen, he simply describes as 'killers' (*ibid*, 143).

In his lengthy introduction and concluding reflections, Tofighian places the book's poetry firmly within Kurdish and Persian literary traditions. He also makes ambitious claims for this work as a 'shared philosophical activity' (Boochani 2018, xxxii) and interprets the genre as 'horrific surrealism' (ibid, xxix). For this empirical historian the book is, above all, testimony. Boochani's journalism has consistently reported on the harsh pragmatism of Australia's immigration practice, best expressed by Prime Minister John Howard in 2001: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Howard, 2001). With his co-directed film, also shot on a mobile phone, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (Sarvestani and Boochani, 2017), and with this book, Boochani has sought a wider audience, adding an artistic sensibility to

straightforward reportage. Boochani has, under remarkable circumstances, produced a historical record that exposes the systemic horrors of mandatory detention. He argues, 'This space is part of Australia's legacy and a central feature of its history – this place is Australia itself – this right here is Australia' (Boochani 2018, 158).

Many in Australia agree. Winning praise from prominent Australian writers, *No Friends But the Mountains* also won Australia's richest literary prize in 2019; Boochani was given an exemption from the judges of the usual citizenship requirement. The Australian Anthropological Society has also created an occasional Behrouz Boochani Award, in recognition of his ethnographic work. In July 2020, Boochani was granted refugee status in New Zealand after over-staying a one-month visa to speak at a writers' festival; he is now a Senior Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Canterbury. One of his stated aims for the book , to open 'critical spaces for engaging with the phenomenon of Manus Prison' (Boochani, xv), has achieved spectacular success.

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