CHAPTER 6

Benevolent Arts

The Persistence of Mercy in Humanitarian Logics

Arzoo Osanloo

Tehran's vibrant theater culture does not shy away from exposing the pressing global issues of our time. One particularly compelling production, which ran through 20 March 2017 in the Iranian capital's grand City Theater, is *Manus*, a play about refugees awaiting processing to Australia. *Manus* is the eponymous name for the island province in Papua New Guinea where the Australian government leased land in 2001 to build a detention center as part of its "Pacific Solution," to contain asylum seekers off its shores.

Created and directed by Nazanin Sahamizadeh, *Manus* is "documentary theater" that presents verbatim the words of Iranian refugees, based on research and interviews she conducted over a two-year period.[1] This new genre of theater, itself a relatively new art form in Iran, is a cultural production in which activists, artists, and intellectuals employ dramatic theater art as a vehicle to motivate audiences toward feelings of empathy and compassion for the plight of others. This exhortation includes compassion toward distant others who inhabit differing milieus, whether they be race or ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class, or gender.[2] In this vein, *Manus* highlights the difficult experiences of refugees caged inside the island province's detention center. The refugees express their dreams and desires, even as they encounter an ever-diminishing welcome.[3]

While focusing on the plight of refugees incarcerated on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, the play highlights the travails of asylum seekers, including those fleeing Iran. At the same time, it subtly holds a mirror up to Iran's treatment of Afghan refugees. *Manus*, the play, attends to Iran's unique position as major sender of and host to refugees. While appeals to compassion are

important to motivate social actors, the ubiquity of appeals to benevolence are redolent of entreaties for sovereign mercy. These petitions to power entrench hierarchies and inequality while shifting demands from justice-based human rights—which are born of the inherent dignity of human beings—to pleas for charity, aid, and relief.

Manus, the Play

Manus opens to a sparse, black set evoking a blank screen.[4] The only lighting is a follow-on spotlight that shines on the actors as they speak their lines. The light is invocative of a lighthouse or fog light that illuminates a boatperson's plight. The refugees are clad in a muddy, eerily neutral shade of gray—pants, skirts, shirts, sweaters, shawls, and shoes. The only color is a shock of bright red, variously gleaming suitcases, or, at times, jerricans upon which the actors sit, stand, and speak (figure 6.1). Deep red and burnished, the suitcase-jerrican resonates with both the luster and profundity of their desires for future, the slippery unattainability of their dreams and ambitions, and finally, the banality of their acts and circumstances (see figure 6.1). If the suitcase contains their hopes and dreams, the robust liquid container, the jerrican, provides the awkward contradiction of the flotillas and sunken boats on which the refugees made their way to shore.

Each character is inspired by an actual person, a real refugee, whom Sahamizadeh interviewed, sometimes in person and other times through the WhatsApp messaging application. In correspondence with the refugees and through the use of messaging apps, Sahamizadeh was able to collect bits of data that allowed her to piece together their stories and narrate a thoughtful story arc for each. The play ultimately features eight of these asylum seekers, five men and three women.

The play progresses with lines unfurling as statements of truth, each refugee humanized through speech acts, declaring their truth, often in short staccato statements. One by one, the follow-on spotlight illuminates each of the eight individuals sitting atop a red suitcase-jerrican as they narrate their reality:

> My prison is the most beautiful prison in the world.
> It's like a swamp here, the more you struggle, the deeper you sink.
> You know that the largest smuggling in the world is that of human smuggling.
> Death brought me here; it ruined my life.
> The conditions here are great for going crazy.
> Our memories are injured. We have to think to remember.
> We are ruined; we came here to be ruined.
> They tortured us mentally; they cussed at us, they insulted us.
> The first thing the psychologists here ask you is, "Do you intend to kill yourself?"

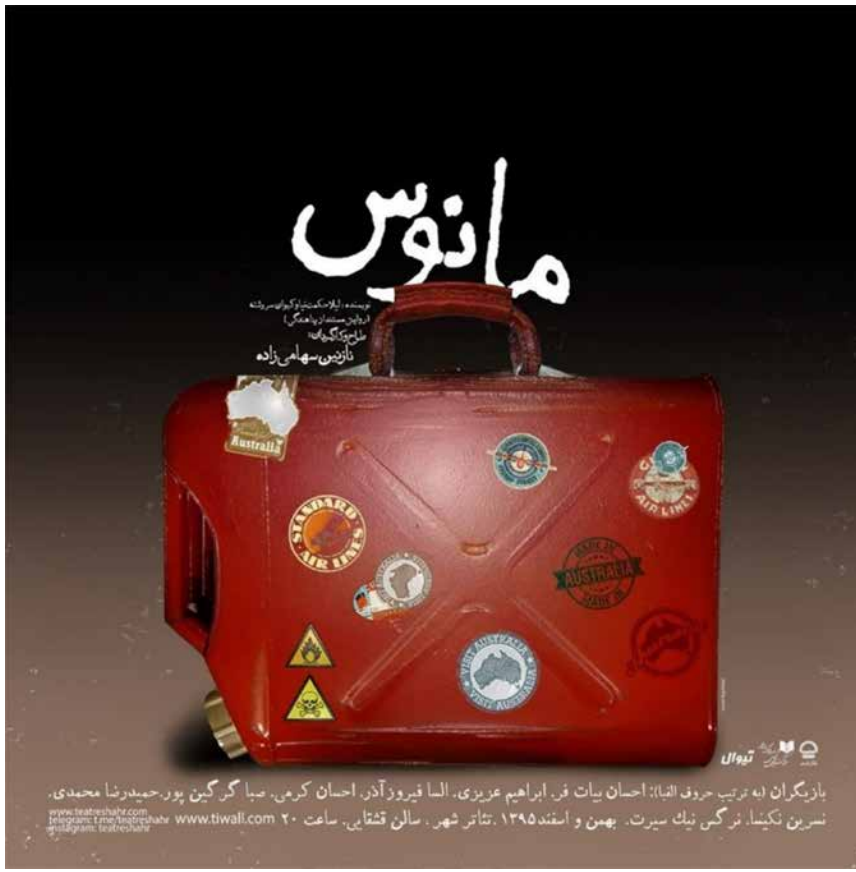

Figure 6.1. • Poster advertising the play, *Manus*, 2017. Designed by Javad Ateshbari. Used with permission.

> I want to leave. Because of you, I want to leave.
> Escape—I have thought a lot about this.
> I have been in limbo for years.
> This is Manus, an island surrounded by an ocean and not connected to any place.
> This is Nauru, a small country in the middle of the water, in the hands of Australia.[5]

Later, the audience learns that the words were taken from the context of each individual's story. Yet, when taken together, these lines, this opening polylogue, represent a whole life experience of asylum seeking. Later, the words will be repeated in the context of each refugee's story.

Creator and director Sahamizadeh spent considerable time developing a methodology for researching the subject of the play. In interviews, she explains how she found her interlocutors, "through a reporter named Behrouz [Boo-

chani]," and collected their stories, "in interviews on the phone" with "people at Camp Manus [and Nauru]." To develop the script, Sahamizadeh notes, "We tried to use people with different mindsets. There was this diversity in the interviews that we conducted with real asylum seekers."[6]

The resulting stories comprise the true-life accounts of these eight individuals. One common theme they invoke is the dehumanization wrought by law and its power to exclude. *Manus* invokes the dehumanization of refugees and asylum-seekers through juridical acts of placing prohibitions on a person's body and thus reducing a human being to the condition of naked life—a term for someone who lacks any legal status and thus recourse to state protections.[7]

> I arrived here three years ago.
> What's my crime?
> I'm seeking justice.
> I didn't pick my family.
> Why after three years am I still in this illegal prison?

This character picks up on the act of banishment and exposes the failure of human rights protections in a world organized by nation-states. Such protections can be enlisted only through the nation-state's acknowledgment of that human as worthy of relief—an act that requires a state's juridical recognition. Arendt's idea of humanity notes this crucial form of recognition and goes further to suggest that having voice within a community is what being fully human actually entails.[8] While the asylum seekers could not speak back to the Australian state or gain legal recognition, through *Manus*, Sahamizadeh not only allows the asylum seekers to speak but also intersperses their communication with actual films of Australian officials addressing the concerns of the state—security and border protection.

Just five minutes in, the Australian state's spokesperson affirmatively marks his unrecognition. A clip projected on the dark backdrop of the set finds the white male gaze of nonrecognition, stating, "I don't know anything about his personal circumstances." And yet, in affirmatively unknowing, he (en)titles the most famous refugee awaiting processing, Behrouz Boochani, who shed the light of notoriety on Australia's refugee policies and raised awareness of the inhumanity apparent at the Manus Island detention center. In *Manus*, Boochani, the character, has an opportunity to speak back to the official and inscribe his experience and his humanity into the record.[9]

> I am Behrouz Boochani. I was a journalist in Iran.
> I sold my clothes so I could buy a mobile and disseminate news of this place.
> Everybody knows me.
> I am a free human being; I can't tolerate modern-day slavery.
> I am Behrouz Boochani.
> I am still alive, and this man is a liar.

The blending of actual words with rapportage, Sahamizadeh explained, allowed for "an impact on audiences and helped to convey more sense of the subjects and details of the asylum debate, and [we] use them alternately in the structure of the show."[10]

Representations of asylum-seeking individuals and their diverse experiences also allow for explorations of different themes rooted in the encounter with waiting and the passage of time. The enduring quality of time passing that the play captures so well evokes the central contradiction embedded in protracted humanitarian emergencies. *Manus* shines a light on humans who are made to wait by the very hosts, states, and NGOs whose purported purpose and raison d'être are to attend to the urgency of humanitarian situations. Their enduring presence is not just a reminder but also a conveyor of the processes that stretch out time. These include a humanitarian time that extends liminality into a state of being and a form-of-life, a life that cannot be separated from its political, social, economic, and ethical surroundings and cannot, thus, be reduced to its bare essence without attention to the conditions that produce it.[11]

The play speaks to the unabated quandaries of asylum seeking. It collapses any distinction between the carceral waiting indicative of contemporary refugee processing and the punitive detention of criminal justice. The characters' verbatim language mixes seemingly disparate vocabularies, highlighting common human experiences, such as loneliness and losing track of time, while also underscoring the unique and contradictory atmosphere of being alone in densely crowded conditions. Sahamizadeh notes the layered and conflicting affects that refugees on *Manus* experienced in interviews she gave about the play: "Prison scares people out of loneliness more than anything. [T]his is the most amazing contradiction in a prisoner's life that is lost in time and seems to be in an eternal bond with thousands of faces, smiles, tears, and bitter dreams."[12]

Manus sheds light on the necessary acknowledgment of one's humanness by the state, a precondition to obtaining human rights, despite arguments that they are inherent. The sovereign gaze of the state upon its fortunate citizens reflects a privileged scope of protection from which some lives could be brought into and made to matter to donors, funders, relief workers, scholars, activists, and ultimately, perhaps, some state actors, even while others remain out of the realm of recognition. Sahamizadeh uses the set and stage to write these bodies back into the scenes, quite literally, by projecting scenes of the horrors of Manus onto the bodies of the actor–asylum seekers: "From the beginning, during the writing, I had this idea in my mind. In fact, this idea emphasized that the bodies of these people are used in the discussion of asylum. The conditions of asylum are such that people's bodies and souls are challenged to achieve their goal of staying in another country."[13]

The hostility with which many nation-states regard forced migrants suggests the need for a new politics of understanding the shifting worth of subal-

tern others. These include not just those who need support where they are, or those who have made it to our shores, but now those whom we, in the global North, have banned. Those who, as a result of their state of indeterminate expulsion, make up the constitutive others of ourselves, form a human border of otherness underscoring the resident population's us-ness. The play's final scene finds Boochani perched atop a pile of red suitcase-jerricans performing a soliloquy on righteous madness and might:

> There is a tree in the middle of this prison. I went up it. It's very hard to climb, but I am a kid from the village. I had prepared an announcement the night before. I went up the tree as an actor, a poet. Everyone came. I stayed up there for ten hours. I talked to them politically. I gave three lectures. I was a real anarchist and a crazy poet. They brought psychologists, police. I threatened to jump. I got rid of them all.
>
> I said, "You must apologize to me." There are many people who will die for their beliefs. They apologized. I said I wanted music. I wanted to listen to Mozart. They said, "No," and again I insisted.
>
> Be sure when a poet on a very faraway island goes up a tree in a prison and wants music as his first request, he has the power and he is crazy enough to jump. They found the music for me.
>
> [Mozart plays in the background].
>
> I felt I was on the theater stage.
>
> [Pauses arms outstretched, looks up].
>
> From here, I hear the punching of a crazy man on a decayed heavy bag. I see the coconut trees that look at the forgotten prisoners, like sad prostitutes. I see the lines to the toilet, the cold showers. I can even see the island of Nauru, the women who walk on the hot sand and the children whose only game is to make paper boats and to sink them in the rainwater beside their tents. I can see a mother who begs her fourteen-year-old child to open the stiches on his lips. I can see a child who has wanted to talk on the phone for three months, but she has lost her voice because she ate laundry detergent. In her mind, she calls out, "Mother, mother, mother." But she has no voice.
>
> [The stage goes dark].

Moments later, the theater is alight with a screen projecting a film of refugees' activities on Manus and Nauru, mostly children, playacting, variously, with black garbage bags. *Manus* ends with searing images of children playing with toy migrant boats in puddles of rainwater, simulating the drowning of refugees. And finally, the screen projects one final, scorching image—of Syrian child Aylan Kurdi, washed up dead on the shores of a Turkish beach.

Our mutual and contemporaneous recognition—both South and North—of our respective nation-states' complicity in creating unstable conditions that lead to the outpouring of migrants fails to fully capture the contemporary moment. Now, increasingly, sovereignty is measured by placing bans and barriers to entry on forced migrants, reducing the possibilities for relief. Such legal prohibitions highlight territoriality as a precondition for recognition, and thus,

respect for human life. Physical boundaries work to refract and reflect back the worth of our own lives through the very suffering of others. That is, the willful misrecognition of the lesser worth of another human being produces the constitutive other who matters.

For this reason, one of the most compelling components of *Manus* is the live audience to which its message was directed. While popular on social media and performed in Australia and several European cities, *Manus*'s primary audience is Iranians living in Iran. Through the different stories, most days performed before a full house, the actors speak to the audience from a context in which Iran is the sending country, albeit one that also hosts almost a million refugees, one of the highest rates in the world.[14] The stories of starvation, violence, rape, and death—due to infection, murder, and suicide—in Australia's offshore detention centers highlight the failures of the international refugee system to recognize the humanity of people fleeing persecution.

Sahamizadeh notes the violence inherent in the global issue of forced migration. The play's posters and handbill contain trigger warnings, noting that it is inadvisable for those fourteen and under or pregnant to attend the showing. Yet, Sahamizadeh finds significance in the raw telling of these stories, saying, "I believe it is obligatory for adults to see these images because they get an understanding of the living conditions of asylum seekers in a foreign country."[15]

Still, *Manus*, as a play, communicates through multiple layers of meaning. The Iranian audience hears the words of their compatriots who fled Iran but could not gain access to the freedoms they envisaged. By portraying the Iranians as the ones in need of compassion, the production of the play inside Iran inverts the hierarchies of power and casts new light on whose lives matter. The play offers a perspective by Iranians, in this case a female director, on the lives of Iranian refugees abroad while also holding a mirror to the Iranians' treatment of refugees inside the country, mostly from Afghanistan.

Yet another picture is also elicited: it is not that of beleaguered Afghan refugees entering Iran or of persecuted Iranian minorities and intellectuals fleeing. Instead, the flight of the sovereign, Iran's dynastic leader Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ousted in the 1979 revolution, emerges as the contrast to these examples and may very well be the refugee flight par excellence. He was the exception to the state of exception. His ouster and search for refuge made legible the nation-state system as it operates and belied his claims to divine ordination. His inability to find a country willing to give him asylum exemplified the red lines of interest that determine global relations of power. Only a few countries were willing to host him because of the threat he posed to their national security. Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, critical of US policies toward the shah after he was deposed, referred to him as the "flying Dutchman looking for a port of call."[16]

What Does "Documentary Theater" Document?

The spare set design of *Manus* highlights a contrast between the actors, muted in humble and frayed clothing in leaden shades of pewter, set against the brightly colored red suitcases-cum-jerricans. Actors sitting astride or standing on these props evoke the many layers of affect associated with international travel: adventure, intrigue, joy, and class privilege. Suitcases adorned with stickers from Australia and its premier airlines proffer alluring fantasies about the freedom entailed in travel. At the same time, the jerrican conjures a more complicated and darker affect found in unintended flight.

First used by Germans in World War II, the jerrican speaks to white or Western audiences—not, however, sparking the affective joys associated with vacation travel but rather the fearful flights of persecuted Europeans in the wake of the Nazi holocaust. But for the Iranian audiences, the jerrican might also serve as a vehicle to reflect on the exhaustion of Iranians caught up in their country's fortune—both good and bad—of being an oil-rich country and thus necessarily trapped in the geopolitics of resource and labor extraction.

In this way, Sahamizadeh uses a stage prop brilliantly, both to expose geopolitics and to hail the numerous vectors of complication that arise from the politics of oil (jerrican) and lead to the politics of fleeing (suitcase). In doing so, she recognizes a range of populations in the plight of those forced to flee their home countries and lays responsibility for that flight boldly at the feet of numerous centers of power—not just the nation-state but also the global economy, supply chains, and geopolitics. Thus, *Manus* is far from an indictment of an individual country or policy. It is a beholding of the conditions of possibility within our global political matrix, with the flight of forced migrants at its center. That is, through *Manus*, Sahamizadeh puts on stark display the logical disorders born of our modern condition and aims to reflect on them as part of a contemporary lifeworld:

> The issue of illegal immigration has always been [present] because there have always been first-world and third-world countries and there have been people who migrated for a better life. But the story is that, in the last few years, when there have been many wars, like in Syria, this problem has intensified. We must not turn our attention to the issue of human rights on Manus or in Australia only for as long as it is covered in the news. Since we did this show [2017], there hasn't been a month or a week when there was no Manus in the news. But we need to talk about it before it comes to this point and look at its different dimensions.[17]

Sahamizadeh employs *Manus* as a vehicle to explore a global condition, even as it is a local one for Iranians on both sides of the coin—as hosts to millions of Afghans and as refugees themselves, forced to flee Iran. Thus, inasmuch as the jerrican embodies this dual positionality of Iran and Iranians, another

important message that *Manus* conveys is one about compassion for others; others who are also ourselves. The audiences of *Manus* embody both the hosts and those who flee. *Manus* unabashedly hails not just the liminality in states of flight but also the constancy of instability and rapidly changing conditions that can move one from host to asylum seeker, from jerrican to suitcase, with just a turn of the wrist. Its message, then, is to prod the audience to an uneasy appreciation of the coeval conditions of being in a state of recognition and personhood, and thus endowed with rights, versus one of abandonment and naked life, and thus in flight. In *Manus*, the director signals that these dualities and potentialities exist in every individual, that we all embody privilege and despair, constancy and flight, and of course, are bearers of rights and recipients of care. The call to compassion is not a plea to the blessed or privileged but rather a recognition of constitutive conditions created by our time—a time of care.

Epistolary Reception and Modes of Care

While Sahamizadeh focuses on exploring contemporary social problems, her works also take up concerns of a wider global audience. *Manus*, staged in international festivals, reveals how a performative exploration of a contemporary global social problem plays in some of the world's important host cities, such as Berlin. Sahamizadeh spoke of the play's reception in cities around the world: "Audiences abroad made a very good connection to the play because this is a dilemma that the whole world is familiar with right now and people everywhere are following the news about it. Foreign spectators have made a profound connection with [*Manus*] and welcome it at international festivals."[18]

Historian Lynn Hunt has noted that empathy for distant others is a modern sensibility that emerges in tandem with the rise of the epistolary novel in eighteenth-century Europe. Hunt argues that the epistolary form of the novel permits a "learning of empathy" because there is no singular authorial point of view but rather several, through the characters' letter writing. This lack of authorship made it possible for readers to identify with characters who were quite different from themselves. Hunt finds that the epistolary novel "could produce such striking psychological effects because its narrative form facilitated the development of 'character,' that is, a person with an inner self."[19] Here, Hunt moves beyond the claim that literature permits readers to imagine being in another's shoes and instead argues that this empathetic understanding is based in a cognitive brain function that has a lasting biological effect. While Hunt distinguishes the epistolary novel from other literary forms, including theater, I suggest that the documentary style of *Manus*, with its narrative storytelling, confessional quality, and multiple points of view, contains the very epistolary features that permit audiences to react just as Hunt describes.

Indeed, theater possesses unique world-building qualities. French actor Jean-Pierre Darroussin has notably found that no other art form allows for the intimate relationship between the actor and audience, which "necessarily listens, witnesses, and hears what the actors say. And that is [theater's] key and unique difference from cinema or other art."[20] For Darroussin, theater, at its very core, is an encounter to be inhabited:

> Theater is a lived experience and those moments on stage are shared in real time. Theater creates a special relationship with the public; it exists only by virtue of this bond. And it is what makes society possible. The audience comes, accepts to sit in silence for hours, to listen to others who will speak of their feelings, sentiments, suffering, joy, emotions, struggles, rage, and, what's more, they [the actors] speak for this audience. The connection between the actors and spectators is unique and essential in the relationship of understanding of society and creates the link between words, authors, and audience.
>
> The actors are able to captivate the gaze of the audience with a simple gesture, to evoke their emotions with a slight detail. It is in these small acts that communication happens and in which spectators reach an understanding, even pleasure, as it penetrates their brains, if not their very pores, so much so that they think about, talk about, and analyze it. After they return home, they will continue to think and feel those sentiments that passed through them by the vector of pleasure, through the spectacle of theater. And with the enjoyment of the play, they remain thinking, curious, and open.[21]

The form of theater that documents verbatim voices offers a similarly epistolary space of recognition in which audiences come to feel the experiences of others who are actual people, as one audience member reflected to me: "What was mesmerizing was hearing their stories, knowing that they were actual people who had really lived these experiences. They weren't just made up out of the imagination of the playwrights and director."[22]

Viewers also noted the ordinariness of both the refugees and their desires: "I was really moved by the simplicity of the stories. They were not seeking anything extraordinary, just a safe and stable life free from suffering, discrimination, and intolerance. They just wanted to live normal lives." Seeing such "ordinary people" brought the refugees and their experiences out from distant space and closer to the audience members, both materially and metaphysically: "While the play was about a faraway island and how badly the Australians treat refugees, it also reminded me of the Afghan refugees living in Iran and how hard we, Iranians, have made their lives. They are the hardest of workers but are poorly paid. They are not respected, and yet, they have nowhere to go."

Beyond the refugees' ordinariness, viewers I spoke with picked up on the precarities of contemporary life that render life insecure with little movement: "What struck me was that these were very ordinary people. They could be me. It made me realize that at any moment, my life could devolve into a situation in

which I would need to seek protection. Then this play also shows the fragility of any security in life. It shows that states do not want to help create a safe place for people who are fleeing."

Finally, several poignant reflections questioned the foundational basis upon which refugee regimes offer asylum or hospitality. Reflecting on the comparison with Afghans in Iran, one viewer told me, "They need to seek our mercy. And this is foremost in our religion. But then, I also wonder, is mercy really what they need? We Iranians are known for our hospitality, but we aren't very welcoming to the Afghans." Another added, "I don't think that hospitality is how we should approach the refugee crisis. Instead, we need to make sure that they are treated with dignity, that their human rights are respected. I am not sure that any country in the world treats refugees in this manner."

Indeed, refugees are recipients of benevolence, not rights. This insistence on the lack of rights is an important thread to follow. At the superficial level, the use of artistic and cultural materials not only arouses popular awareness but also evokes praise for cultural values that include benevolence, compassion, and hospitality. These values also accord with the state's use of mercy and its self-identification as a benevolent sovereign.

Manus's Reverberating Message—A Time of Care

Manus's popularity around the world may well document the plight of so many forced to flee their homes due to myriad conditions that may make life unlivable. While there is no doubt that this issue resonates throughout the world, there is a deeper potentiality that *Manus* taps into. *Manus* explores the current era in which the conditions of possibility for how to respond to the refugee crisis arise and take shape, a time in which discourses and policies of states and humanitarian organizations are more wrapped up in care work than in rights talk.

Today, critiques of neoliberalism and corporate greed, global inequality, and extractive and racial capitalism, and how they contribute to the plight of refugees, abound. This plight has both global, that is geographical, resonance and, at the same time, a temporal quality. Never before has the modern world witnessed the flight of so many. Yet the broad appeal to care and the sustained support for global care networks, what Didier Fassin has called "humanitarian government," has also had another, deeper effect.[23] That is, the persistence of protracted refugee and forced migrant crises has broadened the discursive logic of care-based approaches to social problems and has eclipsed calls for rights-based remedies. Indeed, some two decades ago, human rights scholar Louis Henkin referred to the right to seek asylum as "only half a right."[24] Now that half a right appears as a right to seek only minimal provisions to stay

barely alive, it is no wonder that some have announced the end of the time of human rights.[25] Others have noted the inadequacy of the current international protections for forced migrants and have called for more legal protections and remedies.[26] Some have noted that the solution cannot rely wholesale on law and legality but rather require a recognition of the political stakes and the organization of political solutions around them.[27] In many of these works, scholars have noted the quandary Arendt highlighted over seventy years ago: that rights are based in territorial (state) recognition, and without them, humans fleeing a territory but with no territory to accept them are left at the mercy of states or the charity of humanitarian organizations.[28] But this sort of aid has nothing to do with the notion of human rights as inherent.

Indeed, in these approaches, the goal is an expansion of the kinds of care that relief organizations deliver in urgent, emergency situations, simply to sustain life at a bare minimum. This is how humanitarian care has eclipsed rights. The emergency has expanded into the realm of everyday life. This is partly due to the protraction and multiplication of such emergencies, but also because of nation-states' increased resistance to affording rights, not only to asylum seekers but also to their own citizens. Care work is not an expanding field only in situations of forced migration. It has become the paradigmatic method for states to address broader social issues, both internal to the country and external. Healthcare, eldercare, poverty, homelessness, and education are fields saturated with care-based approaches to serving the needs of humanity, and they are not based on an individual's inherent rights but rather on the state's discretionary power to be benevolent and merciful.

At the same time, recourse to compassion and hospitality idealizes and entrenches a particular type of care as a gift of mercy and legitimizes benevolence, particularly from the state. Unlike human rights, which states actively resist, mercy is discretionary. The state's discretionary authority draws from and embeds inequality.

Questioning the Paradigm of Hospitality

For decades, scholars have explored hospitality as the logical locus for providing forced migrants with some modicum of safety, even if in highly regulated and dystopian conditions of camps and, increasingly, prisonlike detention centers. Few, however, question this approach, preferring, instead, to engage the universality of hospitality as the source for welcoming distant others. They find it embedded in its own undoing, an aporia, in which the will to provide safe haven is undone by the overstayed welcome.[29] Hospitality, as the paradigmatic logic for safety and security in an interconnected world, elides the globally unstable conditions that contribute to or produce such migrations in the first

place. This logic serves to dehistoricize and depoliticize the refugee in order to create the conditions for humanitarian organizations to present their situations as opportunities for hospitality.[30] In such contexts, what is also laid bare is the logic of the state's interest that marks who obtains the sought-after relief to be resettled in the global North. This logic requires some "affective resonance" with asylum seekers, that is, an unspoken but shared sense of social connection, which induces a moral compulsion to act.[31] Those who do not move the sensibilities of the polity are subject to a different kind of humanitarian governance and remain in the global South, nonetheless.

Yet what *Manus* shows us is that states in the sought-after global North have designed policies and programs that make the journey to seek asylum, which is the only right refugees possess, rife with decrepitude and danger. These stark and violent conditions divulge a kind of necropolitics—an instrumentalization of human life and governing through its slow destruction—of the very lives they are supposed to be saving from persecution.[32] What is less visible in a play about a singular detention center is the lengths that countries in the global North go to work together to make such undesirable conditions of reception in the first place.[33] In such contexts, the terms *care* and *hospitality* are, at best, ill-advised and, at worst, opportunistic attempts at evading responsibility.

Appeals such as these, to benevolence, compassion, and hospitality, which arise in part from documentary theater, signal much more than their resurgence in Iran. Rather, they are in concert with a broader, globally enduring logic of mercy that is not unique to Islam or Iran. Rather, this logic of mercy is an outcome of contemporary humanitarianism which operates through neoliberal market logics that rely on and entrench inequality and have come to eclipse human rights. Not only do the laws governing the management of forced migrants depend on sovereign power but, I suggest, appeals to care have also overtaken rights-based demands in a world in which humanitarianism has become a normative mechanism of governance. Thus, *Manus*, the play, as social commentary, resonates because it speaks to the broader, more epic failure of a global system that continues to exploit lives for labor and also fails to protect the suffering of distant others because all protections still derive from the willingness of self-interested nation-states to be charitable and humane. And so, it is through this exploration of the ringing social commentary that is *Manus* that I suggest that humanitarian care captures the zeitgeist of our contemporary period.

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(Princeton University Press, 2020), which examines Iran's criminal justice system through its emphasis on victims' rights, forgiveness, and mercy, and *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton University Press, 2009), which analyzes the politicization of Iranian women's "rights talk." Her current project examines the impact of sanctions on Iranians.

Notes

1. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh." Sahamizadeh conducted research and interviews, while two writers, Leila Hekmatnia and Keyvan Sarreshteh, wrote the play.
2. For a brief history of Iranian theater, see Sahamizadeh, "Introduction."
3. In April 2016, Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court found that the detention center on Manus Island violated the country's constitutional right guaranteeing personal liberty and issued a ruling to close the facility. After it closed, asylum seekers remained until 2021.
4. I viewed the play through a streaming link sent to me by the director.
5. All excerpts transcribed and translated by the author.
6. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh."
7. Agamben, *Means without End*, 4.
8. Arendt, "Decline of the Nation-State," 296.
9. In 2018, Boochani published his own award-winning memoir tracking his years in Manus Island's detention center. He used WhatsApp to send snippets of his writing for collection and, later, publication. See Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*.
10. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh."
11. Agamben, *Means without End*, 3.
12. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh."
13. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh."
14. UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends Report*.
15. Esmaeili, "Interview with Nazanin Sahamizadeh."
16. Kissinger, "Kissinger on the Controversy."
17. "Nazanin Sahamizadeh: Why Don't They Support Documentary Theatre?"
18. "Nazanin Sahamizadeh: Why Don't They Support Documentary Theatre?"
19. Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 43.
20. Laporte, *France Culture*, "Affaires culturelles."
21. Laporte, *France Culture*, "Affaires culturelles."
22. I interviewed eleven attendees and culled comments published in online sources, including, https://www.tiwall.com/p/manus (accessed and translated on 9 March 2022).
23. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 1.
24. Henkin, "Refugees and Their Human Rights," 1079.
25. Hopgood, *Endtimes of Human Rights*, 12.
26. Benhabib, "End of the 1951 Refugee Convention," 96; Donkoh, "Half-Century of Refugee Protection," 267.
27. Behrman, "Legal Subjectivity and the Refugee," 21.
28. Arendt, "Decline of the Nation-State," 296.
29. Derrida, "On Cosmopolitanism," 17.

30. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 389.
31. Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 13.
32. Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi, "Necropolitics and Slow Violence," 110–11; Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 14.
33. Ghezelbash, *Refuge Lost*, 3.

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