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Speaking Silence: The Enactment of Politics in Refugee Protest

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by

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Make a whistle from my throat
I do not know
what will happen after I die.
I do not want to know.
But I would like the Potter to make a whistle
from the clay of my throat.
May this whistle fall into the hands
of a cheeky and naughty child
and the child to blow hard on the whistle continuously
with the suppressed and silent air of his lungs
and disrupt the sleep
of those who seem dead
to my cries.

        -- Anonymous refugee held in Baxter Refugee Detention Centre, Australia[1]

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[1] As quoted in Cox, "The Citation of Injury."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this Senior Project originated in the fall of 2019, when I was co-teaching a semester-long English class to a group of refugees in Cairo, Egypt. At the end of the semester, one of the students invited my fellow teacher and me to join him at a meeting in the refugee community center where he worked. This center served as the hub for a group of his community members who had originally sought refuge in a neighboring country but who had been deported as a consequence of their protest at a United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) office. The meeting to which we had been invited was held to discuss their next steps in their attempt to convey their grievances to the UNHCR. My former student, in inviting us to attend the meeting, had expressed a strong desire to have the story of this protest transmitted to a wider audience. I left Egypt a few weeks after attending this meeting, and my understanding of the discussion that took place at that meeting and the events in question was limited by my Arabic skills. I had hoped to return to Cairo at a later date to learn more about the protest; but for a variety of reasons, including the global pandemic, this did not turn out to be possible. Nevertheless, his struggle and that of his group to have their story told, was the inspiration for me to dig more deeply into issues of refugee protests and their political implications and outcomes. My research has led to the work presented here.

This project examines two instances of refugee protest within a refugee camp or detention center. The first chapter establishes the existing theoretical understandings and debates about protest within these spaces. I indicate how I am attempting to intervene in these existing debates and identify the questions which I hope to answer through my analysis of the protests. Chapter two focuses on a six-month long protest organized by a group of refugee women, who called themselves the Concerned Women, in Buduburam Refugee Camp in southern Ghana. This

camp is an example of a space under humanitarian governance, and this chapter explores the dynamic of protest under this form of governance. The third chapter focuses on Woomera Immigration Detention Center in Australia. I look at a specific form of protest which is enacted through self-harm, and specifically provide an analysis of the act of lip-sewing as a protest. I conclude by bringing these analyses together to advance a different reading of protest and politics in refugee camps and detention centers.

CHAPTER ONE

Where Politics Exists: Refugees and the Paradigm of Depoliticization

> It is a massive thing to live with the title of 'refugee'.
> -Shahin, former immigration center detainee[2]

In the forward to a collection of images of refugees titled *Exodus: 50 Million People on the Move*, the author writes "What does it really mean to be a refugee? In this book the refugees themselves give us the answer"[3]. This book is one of three 'coffee-table' books consisting of images of refugees analyzed by scholar Anna Szörényi. In Szörényi's analysis, these books, which together contain around 1000 photographs, "seem to propose that photography alone is a sufficient means through which such refugees can be known and described"[4]. Another of the books in question, *Images of Exile,* produced by the UNHCR, contains photos of crowds of homogenous refugees in camps, where the only identifying sign is emblazoned UNHCR logos. Szörényi argues that the UNHCR becomes the object of discussion within many of the book's images, with the refugees serving as a representation of the UNHCR's work. Szörényi cautions that the repetition on a mass scale of such kinds of imagery seems to free the viewer of any imperative to actually learn from the words of refugees themselves. It becomes necessary to ask what sort of understanding is produced through the repetition of such images. These images teach us, as Szörényi writes, that "the state of 'refugeeness' consists of a passive, speechless and anonymous visual availability"[5]. To see is to know, there is no requirement to listen.

What does it mean about the identity of refugee that an image can be considered enough to know and describe the experience? These coffee-table books, and Szörényi's critique of them,

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[2] Quoted in Fiske, "Human Rights and Refugee Protest against Immigration Detention," 26.
[3] Szörényi, "The Images Speak for Themselves?," 24.
[4] Szörényi, 25.
[5] Szörényi, 26.

are emblematic of a wider conversation about the condition of refugeness. The following is an attempt to demonstrate that refugees have been produced as a speechless figure as a result of their exclusion from the realm of politics. I delineate some of the academic conversations and debates on this subject, and explore the various ways in which scholars have theorized the depoliticization of refugees. In so doing, I hope to critically engage with the ways the depoliticization of refugees is reproduced in these discussions, and develop frameworks which disrupt this depoliticization.

In the name of humanity

The register at which the refugee is most visible to the average person is that of humanitarian representation. Most people have encountered the figure of the refugee as object of humanitarian care. Images of the suffering refugee have become widely proliferated. Open websites for NGOs like the World Food Programme, Médecins Sans Frontières, or the UNHCR and you will be greeted with the eyes of nameless children, displaced due to war or other forms of suffering. Liisa Malkki writes that this mode of visual imagery leads us to assume that "just the refugee's physical presence is 'telling' of his or her immediate history of violence"[6]. In these forums, we do not hear directly from the people that these organizations aim to protect or serve, but instead, we are expected to trust that the organizations speak for and on behalf of them. This kind of imagery and its attendant advocacy has become the dominant mode of 'knowing' refugees. Humanitarianism holds a monopoly on the representation of refugees, and as a result, is extremely influential in constructing the figure of the refugee. Humanitarianism has also become the dominant mode of governance for the majority of displaced refugee communities around the world. Michel Agier writes that humanitarianism functions as the 'left hand of empire'; where

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[6] Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 390.

empire has wrought destruction, humanitarianism comes in to deal with the damage[7]. Agier writes that "the hand that heals requires a durable system—an organization, budgets, personnel—which has grown in size over the last several decades and which combines a discourse of saving and emergency in a powerful and enduring apparatus"[8].

Much has been written about how this apparatus of humanitarian governance functions to depoliticize those it governs. A wide array of scholars from various disciplines have concluded that humanitarian governance is depoliticizing in the sense that it constitutes its subjects as helpless victims, who are stripped of their political and social specificities. Refugees are positioned outside of politics, deserving of care or resources exclusively on the basis of this status of victimhood. The history and theory of humanitarianism helps to explain how and why this occurs. Anthropologist Didier Fassin traces a history of the development of 'humanitarian governance', a term that he uses to denote the deployment of 'moral sentiments' (feelings which direct our attention to suffering of others, directed from the powerful towards the weak) as the 'essential force in contemporary politics'[9]. Fassin notes that the relationships established under this form of governance are inherently unequal; it is governance animated by politics of compassion, wherein lives "are not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer, or in other words are defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in the relation to those who have power over them"[10]. Under what he terms 'humanitarian reason', situations of violence and inequality are responded to by mobilizing compassion through the language of suffering, instead of addressing the situations through frameworks of justice and politics. In this sense, refugees are

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[7] Michel Agier, "Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)," 29.
[8] Agier, 29
[9] Fassin and Gomme, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present Times*, 1.
[10] Fassin and Gomme, 4.

not political subjects who are asserting their entitlement to certain rights or resources; they are suffering victims, recognized exclusively through their status as such.

Echoing Fassin, Miriam Ticktin, an influential refugee studies scholar, writes harshly about the apolitical positioning of humanitarianism as an intentional result of its founding impulses. Ticktin traces the origins of Fassin's 'humanitarian governance' to the establishment of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in France in 1971[11]. She argues that the founders of MSF were former members of revolutionary movements, particularly the '68 movement in France, who had become disillusioned with the transformative power of politics. As a result, Ticktin asserts, "they turned away from engagement with what they thought of as politics… and instead embraced the belief that one can ultimately address only individual suffering; in this sense, they attended to what they conceived of as a universal humanity composed of suffering victims"[12]. Humanity, as a universalizing category, is endowed with the power to supersede historical, geographical and political differentiations. Ticktin writes that the 'human' at the center of humanitarianism is one "imagined outside of time and place, outside history and politics, one that can (therefore) be universally recognized"[13]. This 'universal recognition' means that the refugee as an individual is eclipsed by refugee as a category. Jennifer Hyndeman writes that "the invocation of charitable humanity illustrates a kind of semio-violence, a representational practice that purports to speak for others but at the same time effaces their voices"[14]. Ticktin further argues that humanitarians are advantaged as speakers:

> "Those who intervene in the name of compassion are looked to as morally and ethically untainted, the only allowable, legitimate response to injustice and suffering. In this sense,

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[11] Ticktin, "A World without Innocence," 2017, 580.

[12] Ticktin, "A World without Innocence," 2017, 581.

[13] Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 7.

[14] Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism.*, xxiii.

"humanitarian government" is considered a force for the greatest good in international relations, and humanitarian NGOs have become privileged, autonomous interlocutors"[15].

This conclusion finds some credence in the fact the refugee is most often encountered primarily as the subject of humanitarian representation.

Ticktin is condemnatory in her analysis of humanitarianism, and there are certainly defenses to her critiques. However, there is widely agreed upon validity to the argument that humanitarian governance does indeed function to depoliticize the objects of its care. There are several ways in which this becomes evident; one is that of the mode of humanitarian representation, as discussed earlier. Other scholars and advocates have accused humanitarianism of depoliticization, in that camp inhabitants are treated purely as physical beings, addressed through medicalized language or categories of vulnerability, or objects of administrative control, accounted for via headcounts or identification cards. Another line of critique is that camp inhabitants are rarely given opportunities for self-governance or opportunities to engage with decisions about their circumstances or future. Specific modes of depoliticization under humanitarian governance will be discussed in further detail in chapter two, which examines a regime of humanitarian governance at a refugee camp in Ghana.

The refugee as bare life

The construction of the refugee as outside of politics encounters its highest theoretical articulation in the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His work focuses on the role of the sovereign in the creation of the figure of the refugee. His conceptualization has become one of the primary means of theorizing the condition of refugees in the modern world. Agamben proposes a theory of sovereignty that understands the power of the sovereign as originating in its

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[15] Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 9.

ability to constitute itself as both inside and outside of the law, as well as its ability to create sovereign exceptions. The sovereign operates through the sovereign ban, or the designation of exclusion[16]. According to Agamben, the primary distinction made by the sovereign is between what the Ancient Greeks called *zoe*, the simple fact of living or bare life, and *bios*, a particular way of living or a politically qualified life[17]. The sovereign constitutes itself by specifying which life is considered politically qualified and excluding bare life. Bare life here could be translated as completely depoliticized life: it is life which is outside of the political realm, included only through its exclusion. Agamben posits that the camp is the ultimate expression of the sovereign state of exception where subjects are held in this zone of indistinction[18]. Within this space, the juridical order is suspended, and therefore there are no distinctions being made between violence and justice. Sovereign power within the camp confronts only bare life, and as a consequence can make decisions arbitrarily, even about life and death, as all forms of law are suspended.

The controversial conclusion to *Homo Sacer* illustrates Agamben's pessimism regarding the ability to resist within this paradigm: "the "body" is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power"[19]. His theory leaves as its only potential for resistance against sovereign power the instillation of "a life that can never be separated from its form"[20]. As many critics have pointed out, not only does this formulation seem nearly impossible to translate into an applicable praxis of resistance, but it also obfuscates the forms of resistance practiced powerfully by many currently inhabiting 'zones of indistinction'. William Walters

[16] Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 9.
[17] Agamben, 9.
[18] Agamben, 7.
[19] Agamben, 105.
[20] Agamben, *Means without End*, 2.

writes that "despite all the insights this perspective offers concerning the complex mechanisms of sovereign power, it carries with it a certain irony, namely, to reproduce the view of migrants as passive, almost helpless beings"[21]. This is not to say that there are not migrants rendered to a state of passivity, but Agamben's theory grants the sovereign much opportunity for overwhelming success in the deployment of totalizing power. In Agamben's view, the system of exclusion and the space of the camp aim to create total passivity, and he grants them this victory.

Despite this critique, Agamben's theory points out important aspects of the refugee experience under sovereign control. The detention center does enact devastating control, even if it is not as complete as Agamben would theorize. Inhabitants are left with very little ability to make choices. Within this space, often the only choices possible are about 'bare life', or the physical body. This is demonstrated by the prevalence of the hunger strike as a form of action within spaces of detention; the choice not to eat is one of the few available. The sovereign often does appear to have the power to make decisions arbitrarily. The process of applying for asylum frequently drags on for months and even years, and asylum-seekers have no real recourse to challenge this indefinite detention. The following illustration, from a play by Shahin Shafaei, an Iranian actor and playwright who was detained in a detention center in Australia for 22 months, is an impactful demonstration of feeling of helplessness at the hands of arbitrary decision making by the sovereign power.

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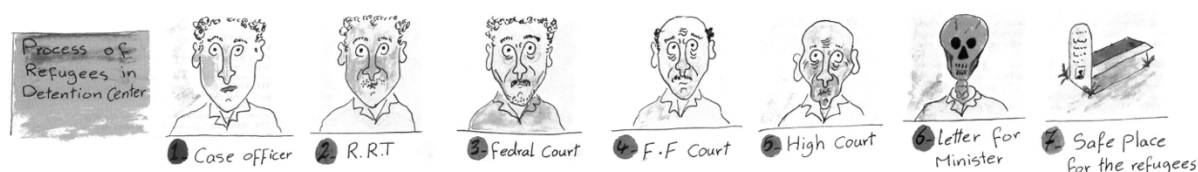
[21] Walters, "Acts of Demonstration: Mapping the Territory of (Non‑‑‑)Citizenship," 188.

Illustration from *Refugtive,* depicting the experience of a detained refugee during the process of applying for asylum[22]

Shafaei's depiction of the experience of detained asylum-seekers evidences the extremity of the situation in which they find themselves. Additional evidence of this extremity will be further elaborated in chapter three, which looks at protest in a detention center in Australia. Agamben's work is useful in its powerful theorization of these aspects of the experience of refugees in states of exception.

Against Agamben

Because of the size of his theoretical influence on the field, 'for' or 'against' Agamben at times appears to be the motivating opposition in theoretical analyses of refugee and migrant activism. His pessimism about the possibility of resistance within the refugee camp or detention center is particularly generative. His theory is complicated by increasingly frequent instances of protest and other forms of activism in camps and detention centers. Many scholars have highlighted these powerful instances of activism and resistance occurring within refugee camps and detention centers to refute Agamben's conclusion about the impossibility of escaping the condition of bare life. Put otherwise, these examples are used to refute Agamben's conclusion that depoliticization within the camp is so complete as to make impossible the reinstatement of political life. A growing body of scholarship is working to document and publicize protests and instances of political activism, and develop theoretical frameworks through which to understand them which transcend the shadow of Agamben's pessimism. For example, Raffaela Puggioni opposes Agamben, by arguing that the camp can become a site of dissent and resistance from within, citing the mobilization of migrants being held in detention centers in Italy. In 2001, a protest movement against camps, called centres for temporary permanence and assistance,

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22 Shafaei, "Refugitive: A One-Man Theatre Work."

emerged under the slogan '*né qui né altrove'*, meaning neither here nor elsewhere. The movement condemned the existence of such camps both in the country and globally. Puggioni points out that many of the acts of dissent in this movement were conducted and organized by those inside the detention centers, earning them the name '*disobbedienti';* the camp was both the site of and the motivating force of these protests[23].

In another example, Kim Rygiel looks to a collection of camps in Calais, France, called the Jungle, which emerged to house migrants after the closing of Sangatte camp, which was run by the Red Cross. Sangatte, and then the Jungle, served as reception centers for migrants stopping in France before crossing the Channel and entering the UK. In 2009, the French government bulldozed sections of the camp and arrested large numbers of camp inhabitants. This decision was met with a series of highly publicized protests in and around the camp. Rygiel argues that the French government's decision was 'in response to the resourcefulness and agency of migrants in navigating European border controls to the point of Calais but also in their ability to construct a migrant camp (in light of the destruction of Sangatte) as a makeshift and temporary resting place along their migration journey"[24]. As Rygiel points out, this camp complicates the Agambenian understanding of the refugee camp, by providing a competing image of the camp as a site of migrant resourcefulness. Additionally, Rygiel analyses the prominent activism of solidarity that occurred within and around the camp in response to its imminent destruction as evidence that the camp itself becomes the site of political struggle, rather than simply a site of depoliticized exceptionality[25].

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[23] Puggioni, "Resisting Sovereign Power: Camps in-between Exception and Dissent," 80.
[24] Rygiel, "Bordering Solidarities," 9.
[25] Rygiel, 13.

However, the existence and even prevalence of protest and political action within these spaces has not been sufficient to refute Agamben's conclusion regarding the complete depoliticization of the refugee. In fact, it has been argued that these instances of protest actually demonstrate the totality of depoliticization. This understanding can be seen in the work of Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat, who apply Agamben's theory to acts of lip-sewing protest in Australia (which are explored in detail in chapter three). In their analysis, the impasse of complete sovereign power theorized by Agamben does leave avenues to challenge sovereign power, which means that Agamben's theory can account for the existence of protest within a refugee camp. Edkins and Pin-Fat suggest that within the state of exception there are two ways to challenge sovereign power: refusing to draw lines between bare life and political life, and enacting an assumption of bare life. They argue that "when life is produced as bare life it is not helpful for that life to demand its reinstatement as politically qualified life. To do so would be to validate the very drawing of lines upon which sovereign power depends and which produces life as bare life in the first place"[26]. They continue that the lip-sewing acts of detainees represent an assumption of bare life, whereby "the subject at one and the same time both acknowledges its status as nothing but life and demands recognition as such"[27]. In this analysis, the existence of refugee camps does not refute Agamben's conclusion regarding the completeness of depoliticization within these spaces. On the contrary, Edkins and Pin-Fat see the protests as actually demonstrating the completeness of this depoliticization: political life has been so effectively separated from these spaces that even protest is actually the assumption of bare life.

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[26] Edkins and Pin-Fat, "Through the Wire," 24.

[27] Edkins and Pin-Fat, 24.

These varying analyses illustrate the core questions: if there is such consensus about the refugee camp as a depoliticized site, both as constructed by those who govern these sites and as theorized by those sympathetic to its inhabitants, then how does one understand the many forms of political action which are occurring in these spaces? What would it mean for politics to be occurring in these spaces? What does it mean for political subjectivity to be displayed by subjects so widely theorized as depoliticized? To develop answers to these questions, it is also necessary to establish how protest and activism are related to politics, and what their occurrence in these 'depoliticized' spaces mean about politics.

The theorist Banu Bargu argues that many readings of migrant protest see it as a way of making claims, and therefore fall short in their analysis. The activism, and therefore rights claiming, is reduced to an instrumental tool. In this form of analysis, migrant and refugee activism serves to make rights claims, which aim to achieve a goal – such as the betterment of their conditions, or inclusion within the categories of political belonging. Their activism, and by extension their rights claiming, becomes a means to an end. Bargu writes that this line of scholarship considers migrant activism "a resourceful way of claims-making under oppressive circumstances"[28]. This logic, which she terms an instrumental approach, sees protest and activism as "merely as a way to make demands, i.e., as a means to an end, whether this end is to claim basic rights, to gain recognition, to obtain asylum or to improve the conditions of detainment"[29]. In describing this understanding of protest this way, as 'merely' a means to an end, Bargu that there is something beyond making demands. There is a suggestion that there is something bigger which cannot be achieved via an instrumentalist version of protest.

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[28] Bargu, "The Silent Exception," 7.
[29] Bargu, 7.

Bargu articulates an important counterpoint to an understanding of protests as instrumental. At times, such protests end up being harmful to the protestors. This is most striking in the protests that take the form of hunger strikes or self-harm. It is less evident in protests that do not take these forms. Yet it can certainly be argued that in resisting or protesting against organizations which provide them with humanitarian assistance such as food, medicine, and other resources, refugees might end up harming themselves by depriving themselves of these resources. Discussing protests which take the forms of self-harm, Bargu writes that

> "Paying attention to the specifically self-directed and harmful nature of these actions necessitates that we acknowledge that they often go beyond a simple instrumentality: by harming the very agents that make political demands in the course of making those demands or sometimes by not voicing any demands at all, these actions also function in a 'nonmediate' way."[30]

Bargu asserts that "while they [protests] can be (and often are) used to negotiate better rights, improved conditions, and greater wellbeing, they are also symbolic and communicative in ways that are irreducible to these aforementioned goals alone"[31]. For Bargu, this aspect of the protest is somehow achieving more than just an instrumentalist function. Bargu seems to suggest that the protest is actually political in its symbolic and communicative function. What, then, does this indicate about politics? If protest presents a challenge to the condition of refugees, in that it is communicative, what does this say about these conditions?

It is useful here to return to Michel Agier's description of the refugee camp: Agier describes the refugee camp as the 'paradigmatic space of survival and confinement' of the 'absolute victim'[32]. He cites philosopher Jacques Ranciere: ''The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the

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[30] Bargu, 7.
[31] Bargu, 7.
[32] Michel Agier, "Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)," 33.

logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible"[33]. The inhabitant of the refugee camp is someone who is outside of the realm of political discourse, recognized only through the expression of suffering. This expression of suffering, in its saturation, now longer even registers. Agier then continues: "The political question that arises in this context, then, refers to a mystery shared by all those who cannot speak: how to move from a moan to a scream? How does one come to voice?"[34]. As Agier is articulating, the question of politics within this space centers on an understanding of politics advanced by Ranciere. This is an understanding in which the division between 'noise' and 'voice' is crucial.

For Ranciere, "the essence of the political is dissensus", which can be understood as disagreement or conflict[35]. Politics is negated when "society is a totality comprised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces"[36]. This totality is disturbed when there is disagreement about these functions and spaces. Particularly, politics proper concerns who is thought to occupy political space or engage in political discourse. These boundaries are maintained through what Ranciere terms the 'division of the sensible'. This division regulates how can be seen and heard; it establishes who is a speaking subject and who is not, whose words matter or whose words register only as noise. The question of how to move from a scream to a voice is then a question of disrupting this division. Dissensus "is not a conflict between recognised political subjects but arises when forms of existence that are

[33] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 126.
[34] Michel Agier, "Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)," 41.
[35] Ranciere and Panagia, "Dissenting Words," 124.
[36] Ranciere and Panagia, 124.

precisely denied equal status demand to be heard, thereby questioning the given order"[37]. The

demand to be heard, and the assertion of your right to speak, is political in that it enacts a

contestation to the current division of speaking versus non speaking subject. It is with this

understanding of politics that I approach an analysis of the political implications of protest in its

communicative functions.

Spivak's warning

In attempting to look at the communicative aspects of protest, it is necessary to keep in

mind the warnings of Gayatri Spivak, as articulated in her seminal work, *Can the Subaltern

Speak*. In this work, Spivak admonishes Western scholars for relinquishing the responsibility of

representation, and asks whether post-colonial scholars could also relinquish such a

responsibility. Specifically, she is critiquing the claim that the oppressed… can speak and know

their conditions"[38]. Spivak asks whether the figure of the subaltern can speak, or whether the

subaltern is always being spoken for. She uses as an example the case of the British interdiction

of the rite of *suti,* widow sacrifice. Spivak argues that the British outlawing of this ritual has been

generally understood as a case of "white men saving brown women from brown men"[39]. On the

other side, she contends that the Indian nativist response would be "the women actually wanted

to die". Spivak then illustrates the effect of these two understandings:

"these sentences actually go a long way to legitimize each other. One never encounters
the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-
transcendent or "fully" subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for
producing a countersentence"[40].

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[37] Flatscher and Seitz, "Of Citizens and Plebeians," 2.
[38] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 283.
[39] Spivak, 297.
[40] Spivak, 297.

Spivak warns that in assuming there is a subjectivity to be uncovered, the silence of the subaltern will inevitably be reproduced. By thinking you can know what the subaltern is saying and speaking for them, you are enacting a silencing. Skipping over the silence ends up reproducing it. Instead, Spivak seems to suggest a project of interrogating the production of the silence.

In this project, I hope to interrogate the production of the silence of the refugee, and leave open the question of what kind of voice comes from the refugee camp or detention center. I do this through a close reading of two instances of protest within a refugee camp or detention center in the following chapters. In approaching the protests in this way, I do not intend to be dismissive of the instrumental aspects of protest, by which I mean protest's efforts to achieve certain goals, obtain asylum, or better conditions. I attempt to honor these efforts by detailing the specific geopolitical contexts of each protest and the protestors demands and goals. However, with Spivak's warnings in mind, I also take seriously the communicative and symbolic aspects of the protest and the political implications of such aspects. I argue that these two protests represent political action in direct and purposeful opposition to active efforts at depoliticization. In the words and actions of the protestors, there is a deep reflection on the condition of confinement within these spaces. The protests enact a campaign to challenge the specific conditions of the camp, but also a challenge to the core structure of the camp.

CHAPTER TWO

'Years of Silence': Humanitarian Governance and Protest at Buduburam Refugee Camp

> If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicity, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse.
>
> -- Jacques Ranciere, *Ten Theses on Politics*

Buduburam refugee camp in Southern Ghana, home primarily to refugees of the Liberian civil war, has been at times hailed as an 'exemplary' refugee camp. From its beginning as an asylum for only a few thousand refugees in 1990, Buduburam at its peak, in as late as 2006, has been described as a 'bustling small town' where refugees live a 'good life'[41]. Buduburam has been described glowingly in reports by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the agency responsible for the administration of the camp, which referred to it as 'a model camp', 'bustling with activity', an example of 'self-help' and 'refugee's entrepreneurial potential', even 'a positive example for refugee situations around the world'[42]. The camp was home to the largest market in the district, as well as banks, supermarkets, corner shops, jewelry stores, hair salons, video clubs, cinema, schools, cafés, churches, temples, mosques, and a weekly newspaper[43]. The camp also featured skills and training programs and put an emphasis on programs for the empowerment of women refugees[44]. Buduburam has been studied as an example of refugee self-administration and socio-economic initiatives[45]. As Elizabeth Holzer writes of the camp as it existed 2007-08: "a demilitarized refugee camp with extensive host

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[41] Omata, *The Myth of Self-Reliance*, 1.

[42] Kpatindé, "A Tale of Two Camps: Bustling Buduburam and Quiet Krisan"; Zongolowicz, "Refugees Rally Together at Ghana Camp."

[43] Kpatindé, "A Tale of Two Camps: Bustling Buduburam and Quiet Krisan."

[44] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 234.

[45] Dzeamesi, "Refugees, the UNHCR and Host Governments as Stake-Holders in the Transformation of Refugee Communities: A Study into the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana"; Omata, *The Myth of Self-Reliance*, 2.

involvement, well-educated residents accustomed to urban life, and a war that ended, Buduburam represented the best-case scenario for this form of humanitarian action [i.e. the refugee camp model]"[46].

Yet, despite these positive reports, Buduburam made news in 2007-2008 due to a six-month stretch of protests against the camp administration, led largely by a group of women who called themselves the Concerned Women of Buduburam. Their protest efforts included marches, sit-ins, letter writing campaigns, and even threats of hunger strikes; they ended in mass arrests and deportations. How did a camp that was once so proudly highlighted by the UNHCR, and which can be considered a best-case scenario for a refugee camp, still result in contentious protests against the humanitarian organization? The history and context of this camp are worth exploring to answer this question and are detailed in the following section. Further, the trajectory of this camp, as a 'model' refugee community, has important implications for the refugee experience more broadly. As protests broke out even under such seemingly 'ideal' conditions (given the circumstance of a refugee camp), the key events occurring at Buduburam offer an important case study for the refugee experience in a refugee camp. More generally, the case illustrates key issues in the relationship between humanitarian governance and refugee politics, and the possibility for refugee political agency.

The History of Buduburam

The conflict that gave rise to civil war in Liberia and its subsequent refugee crisis has a long history, beginning with the founding of the country and the resettlement of liberated American slaves. This population of 'Americo-Liberians' formed an elite class that benefited from their connection with America and took over the political arena in the country. The tensions

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[46] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 9.

between this group of elites and the indigenous population of the country, alongside an increasingly dire economic situation, gave rise to a violent coup by indigenous military officer Samuel Doe in 1980[47]. Although it was originally met with popular support, Doe's regime was quickly plagued with issues, infighting, and corruption. Doe accused one of his government members, Charles Taylor, of embezzlement; Taylor fled and began establishing the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in neighboring countries with the goal of taking down Doe. In December 1989, the NPFL launched an attack on Liberia from the Ivory Coast under Taylor's leadership[48]. Within six months, Taylor's forces had captured 90 percent of the country and the fighting between the NPFL and Doe's counterinsurgency had devolved into a civil war fought mostly along ethnic lines, which would eventually displace half the country, embroil several neighboring countries, and dominate the region of West Africa for 14 years[49].

In 1990, a group of 7,000 Liberians fleeing war arrived in Ghana on a vessel provided by the Ghanaian government to retrieve its citizens. The government decided to settle these refugees in a former prayer camp in the Gomoa district, which would become Buduburam camp[50]. Ghana was willing to host these refugees fleeing its neighboring country, but asked for the UNHCR, who had no prior presence in the country, to step in and provide resources and organizational management to the incoming refugees[51]. Ghana would provide land and security forces, while the UNHCR took on responsibility for infrastructure, social services, and migration programs[52]. The flow of refugees into the camp was intermittent, as the war falsely appeared to be coming to an

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[47] Cleaver and Massey, "Liberia: A Durable Peace at Last?," 180.

[48] Cleaver and Massey, 180.

[49] Sesay, "Civil War and Collective Intervention in Liberia," 38.

[50] Dzeamesi, "Refugees, the UNHCR and Host Governments as Stake-Holders in the Transformation of Refugee Communities: A Study into the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana," 30.

[51] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 9.

[52] Holzer, 14.

end at several points. In 1996, the signing of the fourth of a series of peace accords resulted in an election in which Taylor was elected president, leading the UNHCR to follow international consensus about the apparent ending of the war. Consequently, they officially closed the camp, though few refugees agreed to leave, for fear of the lack of opportunity and safety in their war-torn home country, and Buduburam entered a period of relative self-governance[53]. In 2000, rebel forces began fighting back against the newly installed Taylor regime, and the conflict extended further between borders of neighboring countries, causing the UNHCR to return to Ghana and expand its presence there even more than previously[54]. In 2003, Taylor's regime could no longer sustain its offensive and the parties signed a peace accord, under which Taylor resigned and fled the country, and in 2005, a new president was elected.

There was again international consensus that the war had come to an end, and the aid community shifted focus from the refugee crisis to rebuilding the war-torn country. The UNHCR began the process of contracting its presence and closing down the camp again and launched an initiative in 2004-2007 to repatriate the remaining refugees[55]. At face value, the UNHCR offered refugees three options, called 'durable solutions', from which they could make individual choices for themselves; these options were repatriation, local integration, or resettlement in a third country. Although the UNHCR worked to emphasize the voluntary nature of these options and refugee's agency in choosing between them, in reality, there were many impediments which restricted these choices. The UNHCR initially tried to promote repatriation, but this option was unpopular among refugees, who saw a rough path in front of them in Liberia, considering the crippled economy and housing market in the war-torn country. Further, the UNHCR provided

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[53] Holzer, 13.

[54] Holzer, 9.

[55] Omata, "Unwelcome Participation, Undesirable Agency?," 117.

only meager support for returning refugees, consisting of only a flight and a small amount of money for food and transportation[56]. The UNHCR halted the program when it became evident how few refugees saw it as a viable option. Local integration was also unpopular, as many refugees hoped to be resettled in a third country where they felt they would find more opportunity, particularly the United States. However, the resettlement process was a long and complex negotiation between the UNHCR and possible host countries, and host countries were only willing to resettle a very small percentage of refugees. The failure of these options meant that in 2007, Ghana still remained the largest host of Liberian refugees, with 27,000 Liberians still living in the country[57].

With the repatriation initiative failing and donor funding to continue supporting Liberians in exile dwindling, the UNHCR officially turned towards local integration as their solution for the remaining refugees in Ghana in 2007. The most immediate after-effect of this move was to be the UNHCR turning over infrastructure and services over to Ghanaian authorities, meaning that the refugees would have to begin paying fees for services which were previously provided by the agency without charge[58]. This was a source of distress for camp inhabitants; coupled with the new costs, refugees feared that, despite UNHCR's promises to provide economic initiatives, there would be little economic opportunity for them in Ghana, where there was already economic discrimination and hostility towards the refugees[59]. The sentiment in Ghana towards refugee integration was at times hostile, and refugees worried that the Ghanaian government would send them back to Liberia once the UNHCR was no longer present[60]. The camp inhabitants' feelings

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[56] Holzer, "A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp," 262.
[57] Omata, "Unwelcome Participation, Undesirable Agency?," 111.
[58] Omata, 111.
[59] Holzer, "A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp," 263.
[60] Holzer, 263.

about the lack of a viable path contrasted with the UNHCR's positioning of the durable solutions

options as an opportunity for the refugees to exercise choice. The UNHCR's presentation of the

durable solutions, and their shift to local integration as the primary option, would be met with

opposition by refugees who wanted a wider array of choices and more ability to voice their

opinions about their options.

The Concerned Women protest

When Buduburam camp administration posted a notice signaling their intention to hold a

meeting discussing what 'durable solutions' were available to camp inhabitants, a group of

women who called themselves the Concerned Women began organizing themselves to convey

their grievances at the meeting. This group was concerned that the meeting would not include

representatives who could adequately voice their concerns. As Amanda Coffie found in

interviews with members of the Concerned Women group, they felt that representatives to the

meeting from the camp's welfare council were picked by the UNHCR because they were not

informed on the issues and would therefore not be able to present oppositional voices from the

camp[61]. The Concerned Women gathered several times to identify women who they felt could

properly represent their views, and to prepare them for the meeting with camp authorities. When

this meeting never materialized, the women grew determined to "make their voices heard", and

they staged their first action, a 40-woman march along a highway, on November 30, 2007[62]. As

the women planned the protest, rumors of the imminent unrest spread around the camp; over

loudspeaker at the camp the day before, it was announced that "Under no circumstances are

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[61] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 238.
[62] Quote from interview with Buduburam inhabitant cited in Coffie, 238.

refugees allowed to demonstrate"[63]. Regardless, the women remained resolved to their goal. At the protest, a group of women held a sign expressing their refusal to be deterred:

> We know of the three (3) R's
> Resettlement, Repatriation, Reintegration
> We do not know about Local Integration!!!
> Seventeen years of silence is working against us.
> No!! We must be *heard*!!! [scribble]
> GHANA-UNHCR
> please Resettle us for a better tomorrow.
> We are entitled to it!!!
> It's a way forward
> yesterday of silence is dead and gone
> Today is the day of speaking[64]

In November and December, the women wrote letters to UNHCR offices outlining their recommendations, and also staged several protests in front of the Settlement Manager's office. In January, UNHCR officials returned to the camp to discuss solutions, but the protest leaders were not invited. Their next action was a gathering of 100 women resolved to a hunger strike. In the continuing meetings, gatherings, and letter writing efforts, the protestors voiced their desire for resettlement options and the need for more substantial repatriation support. Again, UNHCR officials visited in February, and an even larger group of women gathered in a hunger strike. During this visit, the UNHCR official announced that repatriation would begin again, and further, that repatriation funds would increase from $50 to $100, but carefully avoided attributing this change in policy to the success of the protestors, instead saying it was a request of other refugee leaders[65]. When UNHCR officials came again later in February to discuss solutions with camp inhabitants, the meeting audience was largely made up of the Concerned Women group. The officials announced the impending end to resettlement programs and food distribution

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[63] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 96.
[64] Holzer, 96.
[65] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 100.

programs. This announcement was met with anger from the women in the audience, who took the opportunity to voice their negative opinions towards the agency's positions. Elizabeth Holzer, in her ethnographic study of the protests, quotes a woman named Mary, one of the primary protest organizers, on the meeting: "[At the meeting] we felt that our petitions were being made, but what they had set on doing was what they were sticking to. (. . .) What they were using this meeting for was to persuade us, not to listen to us"[66].

The officials left, disgruntled from the confrontation with the women in the audience, and canceled the following day's meeting. When the women arrived for the meeting and found it canceled, they decided to begin a sit-in which would span the following two months. The sit-in involved at times up to 1,000 women. Their boycotts resulted in the closing of the schools, food-distribution centers, and nightclubs in the camp[67]. The response by authorities was unfortunate. The UNHCR responded by pulling all officials out of the camp because of the potential security threat. In early March, after a month of sit-ins, the Concerned Women and a group of other community leaders, who called themselves the Stake Holders, and who organized themselves in support of the women, were invited to meet with a UNHCR Country Representative in Accra. This group left for the capital with the goal of communicating the following three requests: 1) the ending of the local integration programs; 2) the reallocation of the money to repatriation programs, which would be restarted with a $1000 package per returnee, and 3) the possibility of a resettlement hearing on the grounds of political asylum for all the refugees at the camp. When the group arrived, they found the meeting was actually being led by the Ghanaian Interior Minister, who threatened them with police action if the protests did not come to an end. As with

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[66] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 101.
[67] Holzer, "A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp," 258.

the first protest, the refugees remained insistent on making their voices heard despite the

opposition. As one of the members of the Stake Holders said of the meeting:

> "We saw the deceit…. We were at the Accra conference center, not the UNHCR headquarters. Both men and women were subjected to body searches. It was deception on the part of the UNHCR and Ghana. Our rights were not protected. Most of us were intimidated, but a few of us by the Grace of God could speak. In every group, everyone has something to contribute, but the general public would not get our contribution because the journalists were kept out. The negative [was] expected from Ghana, but the deception from the UNHCR was not expected. Kwamena Bartels [interior minister] rubbished everything we said. It wasn't easy to speak, but the voice of the people is the voice of God"[68].

The protestor's surprise at the UNHCR's deceit reflects what Holzer describes as the 'bifurcated

governmentality' of camp administration: the UNHCR's subcontracting of administrative

programs and security to host governments allows the agency to retain a caregiving role, while

hosts take on a threatening role and often receive blame for camp shortcomings[69]. A similar

dynamic between humanitarian agencies and host organizations has been found in several other

refugee camps, such as among Burundian refugees in Tanzania[70]. In this instance, the UNHCR

maintained that it had felt the need to seek the help of the Ghanaian authorities because of the

security threat posed by the food boycotts. However, Coffie's interviewees advanced a different

theory: some of the protestors suspected that the invitation to this meeting, and the associated

intimidation, was in response to the women's phone calls and letters to UNHCR headquarters in

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[68] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 101.
[69] Holzer, 108.
[70] Holzer, 164.

Geneva[71]. On March 11, the UNHCR released a statement condemning the protests and calling

them illegitimate on the grounds that the durable solutions were voluntary[72]. Six days later, the

Ghanaian government conducted a raid on the protestors, arresting over 600 protestors; several

days after that, the police staged a more violent raid of the camp and arrested more camp

inhabitants, 16 of whom were deported for posing a security threat[73]. This drastic action by the

police prompted negotiations between Ghana and Liberia, and subsequently Liberia, Ghana, and

the UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement that all Liberians must leave Ghana within six months.

Thousands of camp inhabitants, including many protestors, would be forced to begin the process

of repatriation. By 2010, the camp had almost entirely stopped receiving humanitarian aid; in

2012, the UNHCR announced the cessation of refugee status for Liberians worldwide. Any

remaining Buduburam refugees would have to repatriate or remain in Ghana as an economic

migrant through a protocol of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

That year, the UNHCR officially closed Buduburam Refugee Camp, but 7,000 Liberians

remained as ECOWAS migrants[74]. Without humanitarian aid and still facing economic

discrimination in the host country, "many Liberians were reduced to bare subsistence inside and

around the camp"[75]. Naohiko Omata describes the outcome for refugees at Buduburam as

"'quasi-solution' that serves to conceal the failure of the global refugee regime to deal with the

challenges of former refugees who have been left with an ambiguous migrant status and little

attention from the international community"[76].

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[71] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 242.
[72] Holzer, "A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp," 268.
[73] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 248.
[74] Omata, "Forgotten People: Former Liberian Refugees in Ghana."
[75] Omata.
[76] Omata.

Buduburam protests as case study

   What can be made of the protests at Buduburam and the harsh response they provoked? Why did protests happen at this site? Were the conditions that prompted refugee protests specific to the Buduburam refugee camp, or exemplary of issues inherent to this form of humanitarian governance? How do we understand the protests -- as successful refugee political action or as a political failure? What should be made of the crackdown on the protests by the humanitarian administrators of the camp? Scholars of the protests have offered answers that are specific to the context of Buduburam, arguing that qualities of the camp and its organization contributed to the protests and their aftermath. Many studying the camp have pointed to the ways that camp inhabitants contributed to camp administration and leadership, both informally and even formally through councils and groups set up by camp administrators. Holzer writes that "the Concerned Women protests must be evaluated not as an isolated series of events in an anarchic land but as part of an established template of civic engagement in a poor quasi-township"[77]. These scholars argue that ironically, the forms of civic involvement in the camp, which were often encouraged by camp administration, created the politically active residents who organized the protests against the camp administration.

   As mentioned above, the camp has been cited as an example of the possibilities of refugee self-governance. In 1994, refugees formed the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council, a board of refugee officials who, through a complex structure of committees and units, provide refugee input to camp authorities regarding various camp services. The Welfare Council has been portrayed as "the machinery through which the camp enjoyed sustainable, and largely,

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[77] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 40.

transparent refugee leadership… [that] has functioned on a remarkably progressive basis"[78]. The

UNHCR showed a particular interest in promoting the leadership of refugee women at

Buduburam. In 1990, just as Buduburam was created, the UNHCR published a new policy

announcing their commitment to involving refugee women in planning programs, which

organize services and resources in refugee camps, and other projects within camps[79]. The

UNHCR insisted on female representation on the Welfare Council. Additionally, the agency set

up programs to target gender-based violence, as well as skills and training programs that

emphasized empowerment for refugee women[80]. As the camp developed, women created local

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the New Liberia Women Skills Training

Center and the Liberian Refugee Women association; these NGOs connected with the Liberian

peace movement and became involved in demonstrations for the end of the war[81]. As Holzer and

Coffie argue, the UNHCR's efforts to empower female refugees gave rise to a large group of

women who had experience with social movements and camp leadership. Paradoxically, in this

instance, the UNHCR's emphasis on the political engagement of refugees created the

circumstances of the protests against the UNHCR itself.

Could the protests be considered a sign of the success of the agency's efforts to

encourage the political involvement of refugees? If so, why did the UNHCR respond by

hastening to quell their political activism? As Omata finds in a review of the camp's political

history, the UNHCR's encouragement of refugee political involvement only extended to a form

of political action that aligned with the agenda of UNHCR and other camp authorities. Although

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[78] Dzeamesi, "Refugees, the UNHCR and Host Governments as Stake-Holders in the Transformation of Refugee Communities: A Study into the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana," 30.
[79] Kreitzer, "Liberian Refugee Women," 37.
[80] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 233.
[81] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 115..

refugees were encouraged to participate in the governing of the camp, this participation was only encouraged as long as it did not threaten the authority of the camp administrators. For example, Kofi, a staff member of a UNHCR implementing partner NGO in Buduburam, noted that the Welfare Council (LRWC) representation was not seen to be authentically representative by the broader camp population: "They often call the LRWC "puppet" or "messenger boy" of the camp commander"[82]. The LRWC's cozy relationship with camp administration was seen to hamper the ability of the camp to communicate complaints and concerns to the UNHCR, as all such issues had to be approved by the LRWC before being passed on to the agency[83]. The LRWC were exclusively given the ability to meet with visiting UNHCR representatives and communicate information from these meetings. As a result of this exclusivity, they were accused of hiding information and refusing to communicate concerns. Camp residents felt that this relationship between the LWRC and the UNHCR was meant to exclude the majority of refugees from the meaningful input in decision-making[84]. This feeling was likely validated when the LRWC responded to the Concerned Women's protests by condemning the protests, and instead expressing loyalty to the UNHCR[85]. For Omata, UNHCR's approach to refugee political activism is illustrated by the agency's response to the protests:

> "Without detailed investigation, interestingly, both the GRB [Ghana Refugee Board] and UNHCR quickly labelled the organizers of opposition parties as "bad" refugees who disturbed the peace of the camp. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the existing camp leadership was never questioned by refugee-governing institutions.... The LRWC executive members represented "good" refugees who are law abiding, harmonious to a camp community and obedient to the existing governance structure"[86].

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[82] Omata, "Unwelcome Participation, Undesirable Agency?," 121.

[83] Omata, 121.

[84] Omata, 122.

[85] Omata, 125.

[86] Omata, 129.

The relationship between the UNHCR and the LWRC, and its role in the agency's response to the protests is quite illustrative. In particular, it demonstrates that the encouragement of political involvement only extends to a certain kind of activism that is actually apolitical in the sense that it does not disrupt existing power structures.

This relationship between refugees, their political activism, and humanitarian governance is not unique to Buduburam. In a refugee camp in Sierra Leone, anthropologist Michel Agier recounts witnessing camp administration replace "a refugee chosen by some of his peers to represent them with another, younger, and uncharismatic figure, who was known to the administrators for being especially 'docile'"[87]. In another example, Elisabeth Olivius analyzed humanitarian efforts to promote gender equality in refugees camps in Thailand and Bangladesh and found similar paradigms of 'bad' and 'good' forms of refugee participation. In a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, the UNHCR set up an elected refugee committee with equal gender representation in response to their perception that the camp inhabitants were overly passive and dependent[88]. Although the committee members were not given any guarantee that their suggestions and concerns would be taken into account by camp management, the committee was thought to encourage more participation and community spirit among camp inhabitants. Administrators hoped that the committees would allow for easier transmission of information from administrators to the broader camp inhabitants and encourage a feeling of responsibility and active engagement towards camp management in the refugees. In contrast, a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand, which developed without the presence of aid organizations for its first decade of existence, exhibited a significantly autonomous form of refugee self-governance which

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[87] Michel Agier, "Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)," 1.
[88] Olivius, "(Un)Governable Subjects," 48.

was met with suspicion upon the arrival of the UNHCR. The camp was made up of refugees

from the Karen ethnic group, an ethnic group which had an armed insurgency within Burma, and

some camp inhabitants were thought to have retained links to this insurgency[89]. As a result, the

political involvement of the refugees in the camp was seen to violate principles of humanitarian

neutrality. Olivius found, in interviews with camp administrators, that the existing refugee

leadership was found to be 'politicized' unacceptably through the possible links with the

insurgency in Burma, and was therefore illegitimate[90]. Further, ignoring an existing well-

established women's association in the camp because of this same sense of illegitimate

politicization, camp administrators used a perceived need to promote gender equality efforts to

argue for a greater humanitarian control of the camp. The response of the UNHCR at

Buduburam, and the examples of refugee participation in Thailand and Burma, show a pattern of

humanitarian constitution of legitimate and illegitimate forms of refugee politics based on the

degree to which the politics disrupt the relations of power within the camp. Only certain forms of

political participation, which are seen to be in line with the goals of camp administration, are

authorized.

As these examples in Thailand and Burma show, the tense relationship between the

political action of refugees and humanitarian governance are not unique to Buduburam.

Although the specifics of Buduburam are worth investigating, as Holzer argues, the protests in

2007-2008 and their aftermath did not stem "from a flaw in humanitarian action in Ghana. If

anything, humanitarian action worked better here than in other areas, and the lessons learned in

Ghana will apply with even harsher consequences elsewhere"[91]. In an analysis of Buduburam in

[89] Olivius, 53.
[90] Olivius, 53.
[91] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 10.

this time period, it is important to acknowledge that both the establishment of a refugee camp and designation of refugee status is meant to be a temporary response to crisis. As a protracted refugee situation, Buduburam and its inhabitants presented a challenge for humanitarianism governance for which it is largely unprepared to handle[92]. With international aid running out, a war that had long been internally recognized as finished, and the host country hostile to integration, it is certainly true that the UNHCR faced a difficult situation in Buduburam in 2008. However, acknowledging the difficulty, there are still important lessons to be learned from the protests at Buduburam and the camp administration's response. Holzer draws out a lesson about the form of politics inherent to humanitarian governance, identifying a form of rule she calls

> "compassionate authoritarianism…. This authority is compassionate in that refugees and authorities frame authorities as striving to relieve the suffering of refugees. It is authoritarian in that refugees have little or no access to grievance procedures and authorities face little or no accountability for political failures"[93].

Omata comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that the de-politicization of refugees by humanitarian administrations, seen in the context of the Concerned Women protests, illustrates how refugees are approached as recipients of assistance stripped of their social and political dimensions and viewed through 'the lens of administration'[94]. Although these conclusions are drawn from looking at the politics of Buduburam, they are not necessarily new conclusions. Such formulations of humanitarian governance find many echoes throughout the fields of critical refugee and critical humanitarian studies. Humanitarian organizations themselves allude to the depoliticizing nature of the refugee experience, often arguing that they are a necessary result of humanitarian intervention in the name of relieving suffering. Given this widespread

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[92] The UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in a given asylum country. "Protracted Refugee Situations."
[93] Holzer, *The Concerned Women of Buduburam*, 2015, 21.
[94] Omata, "Unwelcome Participation, Undesirable Agency?," 131.

understanding of the refugee camp as a depoliticized space, what can be made of the political action, in the form of extensive protest, that was nevertheless enacted at Buduburam?

The Protest of Depoliticized Subjects

Should the protests be considered an example of refugees managing to exercise political agency, rebuking their depoliticized subject position? Or does the repression of the protests only further illustrate their depoliticization? The UNHCR and Ghanaian authorities did not consider the protests as political action whatsoever, and instead characterized the protests as the disruptive acts of criminal elements within the camp. Scholars of the camp do not take such a harsh stance, but often do not qualify the protestors as effective political participants because they did not achieve their goals. For example, Holzer provides an analysis of the Concerned Women protests that echoes the pessimism often found in scholarship of refugees about the possibilities of refugee activism and agency. She argues that the political breakdown was the likely, and actual, result of the protests because of the structural constraints that were already constricting grievance practices, communications systems, and durable solutions policy within the camp[95]. Consequently, the protestors were unable to create change or reach their goals as they did not achieve meaningful participation in decision making about their future. Holzer cites Guatemalan refugee protests in Mexico as an example of a refugee protest that did not end in political failure because the refugees were given an official seat at the table in durable solutions discussions between the UNHCR, Mexico and Guatemala[96]. In contrast, the protests at Buduburam failed, in Holzer's reading, because the refugees were not able to create more meaningful formal structures of political participation within the camp.

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[95] Holzer, "A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp," 259.
[96] Holzer, 259.

Other scholars are not so willing to dismiss the protests as insignificant in their challenge to the paradigm of refugee depoliticization simply because they were not successful in creating structural change. Amanda Coffie asserts, "in contrast with those who argue that agency is only present when those expressing agency are able to fundamentally alter the structures within which they operate", that "[the Concerned Women] protest was a demonstration of agency by refugees because it contributed to the transformation of repatriation policies and practices enacted by states and UNHCR"[97]. Although the goals of the protests were not achieved and the UNHCR did not make any significant changes to their structures or policies, Coffie finds some examples of changes in response to the protests. Most significantly, she cites the reopening of the repatriation program and instatement of cash grants; although the grants at $100 were far below the protesters demands of $1000, they were still an improvement from the complete lack of funds for returnees prior to 2008[98]. Coffie's exploration of the events at Buduburam is more nuanced, looking at the protest as an expression of agency within constrained conditions. The results of the protests, despite not achieving the full goals of the Concerned Women, represent the refugees introducing some amount of choice into a context where they did not have it previously. As such, she finds their actions to be at least partially successful in that they unsettled the representation of refugees as purely passive subjects of humanitarian assistance.

These two analyses of agency and political participation rely on an evaluation of the material outcomes of the political action. The question becomes whether or not the protestors achieved their goals or enacted change to the structures governing their lives. The political action is only seen to confront their depoliticization in so long as their activism is 'successful'.

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[97] Coffie, "Liberian Refugee Protest and the Meaning of Agency," 230.
[98] Coffie, 243.

Although Coffie is more generous in her evaluation of the protests and the extent to which they are a representation of refugee agency, this is still present in her analysis. It is certainly worth documenting and highlighting the claims to resources and choices made by the protestors, despite their constrained circumstances. They had specific goals and used the language of 'entitlements' and other ways of framing rights claims to advocate for those goals. However, exclusively analyzing the protests at this level risks reducing the protest to an instrumental tool, in the sense explored in the first chapter one.

Looking at the protests beyond an evaluation of their instrumental effectiveness allows for an understanding of the crucial symbolic and communicative aspects. Return to the sign carried by the Concerned Women at the first march along the highway:

> We know of the three (3) R's
> Resettlement, Repatriation, Reintegration
> We do not know about Local Integration!!!
> Seventeen years of silence is working against us.
> No!! We must be *heard*!!! [scribble]
> GHANA-UNHCR
> please Resettle us for a better tomorrow.
> We are entitled to it!!!
> It's a way forward
> yesterday of silence is dead and gone
> Today is the day of speaking

The protestors describe their experience in the camp as 'years of silence' and assert the protest as disrupting this paradigm. The language of entitlement is used in the sign to advocate for a right to resettlement, but it also functions to situate the protestors as having a right to speak on the options in front of them. An emphasis on speech and ability to assert their voice is present throughout the narration of the protest. Mary, the protest organizer quoted earlier, emphasized this dynamic when she described one of the meetings between the Concerned Women and UNHCR officials: "what they were using this meeting for was to persuade us, not to listen to us". Mary's formulation brings out an important complexity: although UNHCR officials seemed to at

least partially include the refugees in the discussion through attempts to 'persuade them', Mary contends that this is different than being listened to. Mary is saying that it is not enough to be the object of someone else's speech- she is instead demanding to be a subject in mutual exchange of speech. This emphasis is also present in the narration of the meeting in Accra, quoted earlier, where the interviewee described the intimidation the protestors experienced but celebrated that regardless some of the protesters present found it themselves to make their voices heard: "It wasn't easy to speak, but the voice of the people is the voice of God". The protestors point out that the administrators are positioned as the only legitimate speaking subjects, the only voices recognized in their commenting on the futures of the refugee.

In the narration of these protestors, refugee voices are not just a metaphor about political participation or the camp experience. The protest, in their language, becomes about contesting the boundaries of who is given the ability to speak within the context of the refugee camp. By making the distribution of speaking and hearing roles a central debate of the protest, the protestors denaturalize these categories. They insist on an understanding of these roles as a construction by political powers. By insisting that the avenues of expression authorized by camp administration, such as the LRWC, did not resolve their feeling of being silenced, the protestors highlight that only people who speak in specific, sanctioned modes were able to be heard. In these ways, the protest insists on a more complex understanding of what it means to speak and be heard within the refugee camp. Where the camp administration says refugees have avenues to make their voices heard and be listened to, the protestors instead insist there is silencing. Through this, the protest unsettles the understanding of language and speech put forward by the administration. The protest demonstrates their refusal to recognize the way humanitarian governance has distributed the right to speak and be heard. The emphasis on this distribution and

its contestation gives a different framework through which to understand instances of refugee

protest.

CHAPTER THREE

'They were messages': Self-harm protest at Woomera Immigration Detention Center

> Through the wire
> one last time
> please observe
> I am sewing my lips together
> that which you are denying us
> we should never have
> had to ask for.
>
> -- Mehmet al Assad, *Asylum*

The previous chapter examined the conception that refugees and asylum-seekers are depoliticized subjects, a conception that is both imposed by humanitarian governance and theorized by refugee studies scholars. As a challenge to this conceptualization of refugees as depoliticized, I examined the political protest of refugees at Buduburam camp in Southern Ghana. In this chapter, I further explore this conceptualization, turning to an analysis of a practice which is particularly notable for its extremity. Politically marginalized people, including refugees and asylum seekers, have found recourse in forms of protest which are commonly referred to as 'self-harm' or 'self-injurious' protests. This language demonstrates the influence of psychology on understandings of this form of protest. These terms are used to refer to a wide range of practices ranging from hunger strikes, self-mutilation, and suicide. Such practices have been especially prevalent in conditions of detention; the dominant view in the literature treats these practices as symptoms of the crippling effects of detention on mental health. The severe consequences of detention on mental health are well established and certainly worth attention. However, this chapter seeks to understand self-harm forms of protest as political expression, which both arises from, and responds to, conditions of detention and political marginalization. Banu Bargu has described the phenomena of increasing instances of self-injurious protest as the 'weaponization of life', which she defines as the "the tactic of resorting to corporeal and

existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals"[99]. This is the framework through which I approach the acts of self-harm protest discussed in this chapter. Using this framework, I ask whether this form of protest further challenges the conception of refugees and asylum-seekers as depoliticized.

The nature of detention helps explain why detainees resort to self-harm forms of protest. In detention, the state or sovereign attempts to enact complete control over the detainee's body. The sovereign controls where to and when you can move, what and when you eat, how you live. The detainee has little, if any, sense of sovereignty over their own body. However, as the sovereign attempts to establish a monopoly over bodily control in detention, detainees work to undermine that complete control. Some detainees do this through self-harm. As one asylum-seeker in immigration detention describes the effects of self-harm: "people feel they are real again, they exist, they have power over something – their body"[100]. Lucy Fiske, who has written extensively on self-injurious protest within detention centers, argues that this kind of protest serves to "re-establish sovereignty of self against the omnipotence of the sovereign state which detained them"[101]. Judith Butler helps further elucidate the political import of such acts: "political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone is taken to be an act of delegitimization of the state"[102]. Through self-harm protest, the detainee asserts control over their body and also uses their body to emphasize the sovereign's enactment of corporeal control. Additionally, and importantly,

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[99] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 15.
[100] Fiske, "Hunger Strike, Lip Sewing and Self-Harm," 136.
[101] Fiske, "Insider Resistance: Understanding Refugee Protest Against Immigration Detention in Australia, 1999-2005," 185.
[102] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 124.

detention strips individuals of their access to other forms of political expression. Separated from society and often with formal political rights revoked, the standard forms of expression deemed politically legitimate are inaccessible. As one detainee in an Australian immigration detention center explains, "if you're inside the detention centre and let's say you have no access to legal system, you have no access to the media, you cannot talk to the management there, you cannot talk to the immigration department there, you don't have the ability to explain yourself"[103]. The mode of communication highlighted by this detainee – 'explaining yourself'- is a particular form; it is not exactly the same as just talking. It is an effort towards making others understand something, and it requires a listener who tries to understand. This emphasizes both the lack of channels for communication and the lack of listeners.

Under these contexts, the body is used as the last available medium of expression. Bargu describes this as "the protests of those who are silenced and … who protest in and by way of a violently embodied silence"[104]. Acts of self-harm as protest by migrants has been widespread, both within contexts of detains and outside. The context of detention, I demonstrated above, generates a condition in which the access to politically legitimate forms of expression is denied. For refugees and asylum-seekers, this condition is present even without detention. Asylum-seekers are not members of any formal political community, having left their home country and not yet having been accepted into their country of destination. They do not have formal political rights within any country. In the previous chapter, I argued that the regime of humanitarian governance silences refugees and denies them means of political expression. Refugees then might resort to the weaponization of life as the only available mode of political expression, and

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[103] Fiske, "Insider Resistance: Understanding Refugee Protest Against Immigration Detention in Australia, 1999-2005," 110.
[104] Bargu, "The Silent Exception," 5.

turn to the body to express political claims. Many such instances have occurred just within the last decade. In 2016, France bulldozed large sections of informal housing in Calais, a migrant camp at the country's border; six Iranian asylum-seekers sewed their lips shut in protest. A group of Iranian asylum seekers staged a lip sewing protest in front of the University of Athens in a public square in 2010. Iranian asylum seekers have sewn their lips in protests of asylum policy that were staged in Glasgow, London, and the Netherlands. In 2015, refugees stranded at the border of Macedonia and Greece staged a lip-sewing protest after the announcement of new restrictions of migrant movement in the region. This year (2021), over 300 asylum-seekers housed in barracks in southeastern England staged a hunger strike to contest the lack of information about their asylum claims. Such instances are numerous, and those listed here are just a fraction.

In the following section, I provide greater detail in examining the acts of self-harm protest occurring at a detention center in Australia, in hopes of better understanding this form of protest. The condition of detention and its implications for political protest, explored above, are coupled here with the condition of being politically marginalized asylum-seekers. I look to these protests to develop an analysis of the meaning of self-harm as expression under these conditions, when other avenues of expression have been denied. In this context, the protestors have to construct a different avenue for expression. As such, the protest is not purely negative, in the sense of self-harm and self-destruction; it is also an effort at establishing an ability to send messages. I pose the question: what is different about the kinds of messages, for which the ability to construct and send messages has to be established first, in order to then actually communicate that message? How are such messages received, and how does the reception challenge or shape understandings of who can send messages? In particular, the self-harm protest has a two-fold

implication: the protestors are granting themselves the condition of possibility to communicate when other avenues of expression have been denied, and additionally, they are attempting to communicate a specific message about their condition and their political claims. I will first examine the conditions under which such protests occurred, to establish that the protests were indeed forms of communication. Then, I turn to reception of the protests and the implications of the protest on understandings of expression.

Australia's immigration detention regime

Australia has gained a reputation for their particularly harsh approach to asylum-seekers arriving to the country illegally, and many protests have erupted in response to their policy of detaining unauthorized arrivals in detention centers offshore or in remote areas of the country. The conditions at these centers are often dismal, and there is no time limit on the length of detention- the average stay in the detention centers is over a year[105]. The history of this policy will be detailed below. The prevalence of self-harm protests under these conditions is astounding. Just in the period between March 1 and October 30 of 2001, the Australian Department of Immigration reported 264 acts of self-harm among asylum-seekers in detention centers[106]. In 2002, hunger strikes of varying lengths took place in all of the country's immigration detention centers, including the infamous hunger strike and lip-sewing protest at Woomera, which will be discussed in the following paragraph. In 2016, in Nauru, an island that Australia uses as an offshore processing center, two asylum-seekers, Omid Masoumali and Hodan Yasin, set themselves on fire amidst weeks of protests. Four other protestors committed acts of self-harm in the following day[107]. In 2014 on Manus Island, another of Australia's

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[105] Phippen, "Australia's Controversial Migration Policy."
[106] Fiske, "Hunger Strike, Lip Sewing and Self-Harm," 116.
[107] Fiske, "Self-Immolation Incidents on Nauru Are Acts of 'Hopeful Despair.'"

offshore processing centers, four asylum seekers sewed their lips together and around half of the inhabitants of the compound staged a mass hunger strike in protest of their prolonged detention. Lip-sewing protests have also occurred at Maribyrnong and Christmas Island; Australia's detention centers have earned notoriety for the frequency of these protests.

The most widely publicized instance of self-injurious protest in immigration detention facilities was the lip-sewing protest that occurred at Woomera, a remote detention center in South Australia. Woomera, surrounded by razor wire and home to 1,500 asylum seekers by the year 2000, has been subject of much media attention and controversy. Riots, detainee self-harm, and reports of abuse and poor living conditions at Woomera were widespread and widely covered by the press. Even a government advisor called the center a 'hellhole' after a visit in 2001 and recommended it be closed[108]. In 2002, the Australian government stopped processing asylum claims made by Afghans in light of the changing political context in the country, and Afghan detainees at Woomera, joined in solidarity by detainees of other nationalities, responded by staging a two week long hunger strike. Reports by detainees at the center indicate that 370 people participated in the hunger strike and 70 sewed their lips shut, including men, women, and children[109]. The protest lasted over two weeks. The protest at Woomera will be explored in detail in the following paragraphs, for several reasons. First, because this protest was so widely publicized, there is more information about the situation at the camp and the actions of the protestors than is available for other instances of self-injurious protests within immigration detention. Additionally, Woomera is the most widely written about and theorized instance of a self-harm protest. Consequently, it has given rise to much of the analysis of lip-sewing protest

[108] O'Neill, *Blind Conscience*, 89.
[109] Fiske, "Hunger Strike, Lip Sewing and Self-Harm," 116.

among asylum-seekers that will be discussed in this chapter. As such, I wish to spend time outlining the history and political context of the camp and the protest so as to honor its specificity before turning to theorization.

Situating Woomera within Australia's Immigration Policy

As mentioned previously, Australia has gained a reputation for the country's harsh approach to asylum-seekers arriving to the country without prior authorization; this is an approach which developed in the latter half of the 20th century. The country accepts registered refugees through their Humanitarian Programme under international humanitarian obligations, and is considered to be fairly liberal and generous in this regard. However, asylum-seekers arriving to the country without prior authorization, especially by boat, is a source of particular fear and hostility. Australia's approach to these 'illegal' asylum-seekers is among the harshest in the world. Woomera Immigration Detention Center was opened in 1999, around a decade after the instatement of mandatory detention of unauthorized asylum-seekers arriving in Australia.

Prior to 1970's, there were very few asylum-seekers arriving to the country, and they were largely Europeans fleeing the Soviet Union, who fit within the definitions of the White Australia policy, which forbade immigration of non-Europeans[110]. Public reception of these refugees was friendly, likely because they were mostly Europeans and did not threaten the racial identity of the country. By the mid 1970s, the White Australia policy had been thrown out. Subsequently, Australia became a country of first asylum to asylum-seekers arriving by boat from Southeast Asia, as the Vietnam War came to an end and the Communist countries of that region faced increasing economic isolation[111]. Public and governmental anxiety about

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[110] Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, 180.
[111] Motta, "'Between a Rock and a Hard Place,'" 13.

immigration increased in response to these migration patterns. The White Australia policy had originally been designed "to guard effectively against the dangers of Asiatic immigration", and although the policy had formally ended, xenophobia towards Asian migrants still informed public opinion[112]. Another wave of asylum-seekers from Vietnam and China in the late 1980's scared the government into adopting a policy of deterrence via the mandatory detention of all unauthorized arrivals[113]. In 1992, Australia implemented a 'mandatory and non-reviewable' detention of any unauthorized arrival, until a valid visa was obtained or until deportation or removal from Australia[114] .

A large body of scholarship has been devoted to examining how the Howard government, elected in 1996, championed the reemergence of race as a central concern of Australian politics, including a renewed paranoia over the arrival of 'boat people'. During this period of time, Australia saw an increase in asylum-seekers from the Middle East and central Asia arriving to Australia in the wake of UN sanctions on Iraq, coupled with Iran's unwillingness to continue hosting refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan[115]. The reaction of the government and public towards these asylum-seekers was immediately hostile; some historians have suggested that the fact that many of the arriving individuals were Muslim was the cause of particularly intense xenophobia[116].

The country begun constructing and operating seven Immigration Detention Centers in remote locations within the country, all managed by a subsidiary of a major U.S. private prison

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[112] Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 67.

[113] Motta, "'Between a Rock and a Hard Place,'" 14.

[114] Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 84.

[115] Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, 193.

[116] Jupp, 193.

corporation, in response to the wave of asylum-seekers[117]. It has been suggested that the remote

locations of the centers were designed to hide the plight of the asylum-seekers, and to isolate

them from support services[118]. Suspicion of these asylum-seekers was stoked by the government:

in 1999, the then Immigration Minister accused asylum-seekers arriving by boat of throwing

children overboard in an attempt to manipulate the government into accepting their asylum

claim. This accusation was reiterated repeatedly, even though it was later proven to be false[119].

The country's hostility towards arriving unauthorized asylum-seekers became clear to the world

with the widely publicized *Tampa* Affair. In August 2001, 438 asylum-seekers on a sinking boat

were rescued by a Norwegian freight in international waters between Indonesia and Christmas

Island, a remote island classified as an Australian Indian Ocean Territory. The Australian

government refused to let the boat enter Australian territorial waters, even deploying military

countermeasures and threatening the boat's captain with prosecution; the asylum-seekers, who

were largely from Afghanistan, were forced to wait onboard for nine days[120].

The government's handling of this event was popular: 77% of Australians agree with the

decision to keep the asylum-seekers from entering the country. One poll showed that Howard's

popularity jumped ten percent in the week following the Tampa Affair[121]. The Howard campaign

leaned into this, using as a campaign slogan: "we will decide who comes to this country, and the

circumstances in which they come'[122]. As one protester noted, "unfortunately they didn't look at

us as humans in need for their help. They looked at us as a human that they can use in their

[117] Evans, "Asylum Seekers and 'Border Panic' in Australia," 164.
[118] Stevens, "Asylum Seeking in Australia," 881.
[119] Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 71.
[120] Dimasi and Briskman, "Let Them Land," 200.
[121] As cited in Gale, "A Politics of Fear in Australia: Representations of Refugees in the Media," 9.
[122] Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 71.

election to win and to prevail"[123]. The campaign strategy worked: John Howard won another term in a 2001 election where he had faced possible defeat. As Peter Mares bitingly writes in his book chronicling the impact of the Tampa Affair, "the Australian tendency to panic at the sight of a boat on the horizon had helped to deliver John Howard a third term in office"[124]. Coupling the Howard's administration's increased popularity with escalating antagonistic views towards people from the Middle East in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the government passed sweeping immigration measures[125]. Australia's offshore territories were declared outside the county's 'migration zones', meaning any unauthorized arrivals to these territories were subject to mandatory detention, and were also denied access to refugee tribunals, appeal procedures, and legal representation[126]. This was followed by the 'Pacific solution', an agreement between the Australian government, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru to house asylum seekers in offshore processing facilities at Australia's expense, in addition to the detention centers already existing within the country.

January 2002 protest

This is the political climate into which the protests at Woomera in 2002 entered. The Prime Minister and his administration were pointedly hostile to asylum-seekers, and public opinion was heavily tipped against them. Woomera Immigration Detention Center itself was also subject of particular hostility and notoriety, as a result of mass escape of detainees in June 2000, and in the riots that occurred in August of that year[127]. In 2002, a series of self-injurious protests

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[123] Fiske, "Human Rights and Refugee Protest against Immigration Detention," 24.

[124] Mares, *Borderline*, 3.

[125] Dimasi and Briskman, "Let Them Land," 201; Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 73.

[126] Skulan, "AUSTRALIA'S MANDATORY DETENTION OF 'UNAUTHORIZED' ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORY, POLITICS AND ANALYSIS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW," 74.

[127] Stevens, "Asylum Seeking in Australia," 881.

occurred at the detention center, involving hunger strikes, lip-sewing, and self-mutilation. The year began with a massive protest in January in response to the Australian government's announcement of a freeze on the processing of the asylum claims made by Afghans. In light of the fall of the Taliban and the instatement of an Interim Authority in Afghanistan in December 2001, the government decided that Afghan asylum-seekers were no longer likely to have a legitimate claim of persecution. This was a contentious claim, considering the ongoing U.S. military occupation of the country, the violent territorial disputes occurring between warlords, and the continuing influence of the Taliban despite the official governmental transition; the UNHCR considered it too early to make such a decision. This announcement was particularly upsetting to the Hazara Afghans, who made up the majority of Afghan asylum-seekers in Australia. Hazaras are a Shiite minority who have suffered a long history of violent persecution in Afghanistan going back hundreds of years. Hazaras were amongst the ethnic minorities targeted by the Taliban, but their persecution predated the Taliban regime, and their fear of return was still present even with the instatement of the Interim Authority. The hunger strike protest was initiated by Afghan detainees, but Iranian and Iraqi detainees, among other nationalities, joined the protest in solidarity. As the protests progressed, the demands extended from a reversal of the freeze on processing of Afghan asylum claims, towards broader demands addressing the dire conditions at Woomera, and the condition of detained asylum-seekers generally. Protestors spent the day and night outside, laying in the blazing sun during the day and sleeping in temperatures that dropped to near freezing at night. Authorities became concerned as the possibility of detainee fatalities or severe injury became increasingly eminent.

A week into the protest, government officials were sent in to assess the situation and attempt to negotiate with protestors. Members of the Immigration Detention Advisory Group

(IDAG) held a series of meetings with the protestors, spending 18 hours straight in discussions with hunger strikers on January 22[128]. A member of IDAG, Paris Aristotle, who had called the center a 'hellhole' after a visit in 2001, was horrified by the even worse conditions he witnessed this visit. After the meetings, IDAG members flew to Canberra and met with Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock, telling him that protestors were intent on communicating their legitimate grievances. IDAG advised the Immigration Minister to close Woomera, as conditions at the facility were found to be beyond repair and prospect of a fatality at the center becoming increasingly inevitable without action[129]. IDAG's comments to the government and descriptions of the protests in the media propelled the situation at Woomera into the public eye. Regardless, Ruddock declined to take action and characterized the protests as an attempt to blackmail the government, announcing that protestors should just 'go home' if they do not like Woomera. Prime Minister John Howard accused the protestors of trying to 'morally intimidate' Australians, stating that he would not 'make any apology' for the mandatory detention policy[130]. Protestors became increasingly desperate as the protest approached its second full week and the government showed no intention to listen. Discussions of a mass suicide attempt began circulating among the detainees.

Mahzar Ali was a leader of the protest who had been involved in meetings with the IDAG members. He was considered a spokesperson for the group. Hearing of the suicide discussions, Ali felt the need to take action to avoid mass death. Paris Aristotle, the IDAG member, described Ali as "'a very calm, very intelligent young man who spoke with great sincerity with us. He was very anxious that several people were talking about committing suicide. So the only

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[128] O'Neill, *Blind Conscience*, 92.

[129] Fiske, "Hunger Strike, Lip Sewing and Self-Harm," 117.

[130] O'Neill, *Blind Conscience*, 90.

thing he felt he could do, the only sense of control he had, was to say to people "Don't you do anything, I will do something."'[131] On the twelfth day of the protest, January 26, 2002 - on the holiday of Australia Day - Mahzar Ali scaled the fence surrounding Woomera, and, in front of cameras, news reporters, guards, and fellow detainees, threw himself onto the barbed wire below. Mazhar sustained serious, gruesome injuries requiring hundreds of stitches, but miraculously survived[132]. His jump is captured by news cameras and the horrifying moment is relived repeatedly on television screens around the country. The action captures national and even international attention. A fellow detainee described the event: "our brave leader Mahzar Ali climbs to the top of the fence and throws himself on the razor wire in an effort for us to be taken seriously. It gives a boost to people's courage"[133]. On January 30, the Australian government announced that it would resume the processing of asylum claims by Afghans. The protestors collectively agree to stop their hunger strike in the response to the announcement. Strikes, riots, and self-harm protests continued throughout the following year, and Woomera remained subject of much controversy and media attention. In April 2003, the government announced that Woomera would be closed and remaining detainees would be transferred to Baxter Detention Center.

The Man who Jumped[134]

Mazhar Ali's jump, which brought immense publicity to the January protest, also brought attention to the plight of his family, who would become possibly the most controversial and highly publicized asylum-seekers in Australia. Mazhar's family were Hazara Afghans who had

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[131] O'Neill, 93.

[132] O'Neill, 92.

[133] Cited in Fiske, "Insider Resistance: Understanding Refugee Protest Against Immigration Detention in Australia, 1999-2005," 179.

[134] This is the name of a documentary film which explores Mahzar Ali's story and the protests at Woomera. See Vines, *The Man Who Jumped*.

fled to Pakistan to escape persecution under the Taliban regime. In 2001, Mazhar and his sister, Roqia Bakhtiyari, and her five children, left for Australia to join Roqia's husband, Ali Bakhtiyari, who had entered country two years previously and had already been granted a protection visa[135]. Upon their arrival to the country on January 21, 2001, they were placed in detention at Woomera. In May, Roqia's application for a protection visa was denied; she then appealed the decision to the Refugee Review Tribunal. In July, her appeal was rejected and the tribunal concluded she was not actually from Afghanistan based on a language analysis which indicated her dialect actually originated in Pakistan, as well as her inability to identify the currency of Afghanistan[136]. In the following months of the family's detainment at Woomera, psychologists repeatedly noted the declining mental health of the family, especially the two boys, Almadar, 13, and Montazar, 12. Roqia and the two boys all had sewn their lips together in frustration at their detention, and Almadar once carved the word 'freedom' into his arm[137]. Regardless, the family were to remain in detention at Woomera until their removal from the country.

Mazhar's jump during the January 2002 protest brought attention to his family's story and their failed visa application. Shortly after, the Immigration Department began investigating Ali, Roqia's husband, interrogating whether he was indeed from Afghanistan[138]. In June of that year, another large protest and hunger strike began in Woomera around World Refugee Day. Activists outside the detention center tried to pull down the fences around the center and pass

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[135] Bailey, "Strategy, Rupture, Rights," 33.

[136] Corlett, *Following Them Home*. Refugee lawyer Mary Crock notes that Roqia's inability to identify the currency could be attributed to the fact that she was shown currency from a part of Afghanistan controlled by the Northern Alliance. See Crock, "Tragedy of the Bakhtiyari Family."

[137] Corlett, *Following Them Home*, 19.

[138] Corlett, 21.

wire cutters to the detainees inside[139]. Ten detainees manage to escape through the broken fence, including Almadar and Montazar. The two boys made it all the way to Melbourne where they walked into the British Consulate to seek asylum. Their request was denied and they were returned to Australia. Images of the boys being driven back to Woomera made front pages.

The media became obsessed with the story, and many newspapers and magazines published articles debating the credibility of the family's asylum claims and nationality[140]. The government fed the controversy, continuing to intensively investigate Ali Bakhtiyari's nationality and allegedly even feeding information undermining his story to the media[141]. Two journalists went so far as to go to Afghanistan attempting to determine Ali's birthplace. On December 4, 2002, Ali's protection visa was cancelled, and he was placed in detention at Villawood Immigration Detention Center. Roqia and her children, with the help of lawyers, brought legal challenges related to their detention to Australia's High Court and Family Court; their appeal succeeded in the Family Court but the High Court found that the lower court did not have jurisdiction to release the family[142].

As the case continued to gain media attention, Immigration Minister Ruddock commented publicly on the case to the media several times. Ruddock insisted that this unusually pointed public attention to an individual case on the part of the government was not their fault, telling the media that he "wouldn't be talking about his case but for the fact that they have sought to use the media to put pressure on me to give outcomes to which they are not entitled"[143]. The

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[139] O'Neill, *Blind Conscience*, 99.

[140] Importantly, Mary Crock points out that the Bakhtiyari's Hazara ethnicity was never in question, and Hazaras have also been targeted in Pakistan- this is to say, the family also could have credible fears of persecution even if they were indeed from Pakistan.

[141] Corlett, *Following Them Home*, 23.

[142] Corlett, 34.

[143] Corlett, 24.

Immigration Minister positioned himself as victim to the Bakhitiyari family's unfair use of the media to pressure the government. Despite this supposed 'pressure', the family won no victories in their struggle. Mahzar Ali was deported to Pakistan, and removal proceedings began against Roqia and her children. After arriving in Pakistan, Mahzar returned home to Afghanistan, and gathered several documents and confirmation by government officials that the family were indeed citizens of the country[144]. It did not matter; the rest of the family was deported to Pakistan, and eventually returned home to Afghanistan.

The story of Mahzar Ali and the Bakhitiyari family is explored here in detail partially because it is illustrative of many elements of the experience of asylum-seekers in detention at Woomera, and of the experience of asylum-seekers more broadly. First, the family's story puts names and faces to an experience which was widespread yet often went unnoted and anonymous. Many asylum-seekers at Woomera experienced the rejection, frustration, and despair of the family's drawn out battle for immigration status. Roqia's rejected asylum claim could have easily gone unnoticed among the many other rejected asylum claims, if not for the notoriety attracted by Mahzar's jump. The acts of self-harm that Roqia, Almadar, and Montezar underwent were unfortunately far from uncommon in Woomera. Indeed, IDAG members described self-harm as 'endemic' to the detention center during their 2002 visit[145]. Even Almadar and Montezar's escape from Woomera was not unique, as they had been among 40 other escapees during the June protests. As will become clear later in the chapter, the government's response to the family echoed their more general response to the protests at Woomera in January 2002. In many ways, this family's story embodies the story of Woomera.

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[144] Crock, "Tragedy of the Bakhtiyari Family."
[145] O'Neill, *Blind Conscience*, 93.

Corporeal Protest

The story of Mazhar Ali and Roqia, Montezar, and Almadar Bakhtiyari is particularly striking because of the forms of self-harm they practiced. Montezar, Almadar, and Roqia all sewed their lips together. Almadar carved the word freedom into his arm. Mahzar threw himself onto razor wire, capturing the nation's attention. Their forms of self-harm protest used their bodies as a conduit for their claims. This form of protest has been called corporeal protest. A detainee at Woomera explains: "People, they were sewing their lips and throwing themselves onto the razor wires and stuff, they were messages. Messages from the people in the detention centre"[146]. Denied other avenues for expression, the detainees used their bodies. To their fellow detainee, that these actions would contain messages appears evident. Mahzar's act of throwing himself onto the razor wire calls violent attention to the wire. He uses his body as a focusing device, bringing into shocking relief the technology of detention that is the razor wire. He forces the observer to confront the wire itself. He compels the outside observer to focus on that which shapes the visual field of the inhabitants. Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian writer and journalist who was detained at Manus Island, describes a young detainee staring at the wire: "Alienated from home – reflected in the way he stares at those / Walls of wire /"[147]. The wires create the space of the center and impose visually on inhabitants their condition of detention and alienation. By violently throwing his body against the wire, Mahzar Ali forces outside viewers, such as the news cameras which surrounded the center that day, to confront the wire's presence and meaning. In so doing, he communicates a message about the wire and the condition of detention which it facilitates.

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[146] Fiske, "Hunger Strike, Lip Sewing and Self-Harm," 14.

[147] Boochani, Tofighian, and Flanagan, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 172.

The use of the body as a medium for communication necessarily shapes the messages that are expressed. In other words, the medium becomes, at least partially, the message itself: the necessity to use the body as medium communicates the complete denial of other mediums of expression. The medium both speaks to the limitation of possibilities of expression, and points to the attempt to develop a new language of communication through the body. The medium also both limits and opens up interpretations of the message itself. Additionally, the presence of news cameras and the widespread transmission of images and videos of the protests means that the messages are additionally expressed through these forms of media. The protests have two vectors: inward, through the body, and outward, through visual transmission. The protest is mediated publicly through the media, in addition to its mediation through the individual body. Here, both the presence of the cameras, and the body itself, are being weaponized to make public the claims of the protestors.

The lip-sewing which was practiced by Roqia, Montezar and Almadar, as well as many other detainees at Woomera, has become a widespread form of corporeal protest among refugees and asylum-seekers. There are several ways to understand what is being conveyed via the sewing of lips. Undoubtedly, it is an assertion of silence. It can be read as a reenactment of the silencing of the asylum-seekers by the government, meant to draw attention to the government's actions. It can be considered as an illustration of the condition of being silenced in which the asylum-seekers find themselves. As Ron Hoenig writes, "Stitched lips close off nourishment, language, love. Sealing them in protest externalizes and embodies the silence, amplifies the silencing.

Screams the silence"[148]. Mehmet Al Assad's poem *Asylum* helps further an understanding this act:

> "Will you please observe through the wire
> I am sewing my feet together
> They have walked about as far as they ever need to go
>
> Will you further observe
> through the wire
> I am sewing my heart together
> It is now so full of the ashes of my days it will not hold any more
>
> Through the wire one last time
> please observe
> I am sewing my lips together
> that which you are denying us we should never have
> had to ask for."

Following the narrator's statement that they are sewing their lips, Al Assad writes "that which you are denying us we should never have / had to ask for". The lip-sewing has two functions. It reenacts the denial of speech, and embodies a refusal to continue asking for that which should be given. Al Assad asserts that they are being forced into the position of asking something which they should not have to, and are sewing their lips in refusal to continue doing so.

This understanding, which sees lip-sewing as the refusal to speak, is echoed by Banu Bargu: "silence is …announced with the visual and visceral demarcation of suturing one's lips, transmogrifying silence into an embodied and violent withholding of speech"[149]. As Bargu explains, speech has long been considered the characteristic which separates humans from other animals. She points to an understanding of speech put forward by Aristotle, where humans are

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[148] Hoenig, "Reading Alien Lips : Australian Print Media Depictions of Asylum Seekers and the Construction of National Identity," 133.
[149] Bargu, "The Silent Exception," 11.

the only animals with an understanding of the just and the unjust, and speech is that which is used to articulate this understanding. Bargu continues:

> "the withdrawal from speech is the announcement of a refusal to participate in the articulation of the good and the just. It is a retreat from speech to the capacity to speak, choosing to withhold the action of speaking under conditions of injustice in which a shared sense of humanity has become impossible. In effect, it is to stage a retreat from the human community of speech whose distinguishing characteristic should have been its relation to justice but is not"[150].

Al Assad's poem seems to confirm this understanding. With "that which you are denying us we should never have / had to ask for", Al Assad makes a similar accusation to Bargu when she writes that the human community's "distinguishing characteristic should have been its relation to justice but is not". In Al Assad's poem, the denial that that which they 'should never have had to ask for' indicates the lack of a shared sense of humanity. A shared sense of humanity would include a recognition of speech. Here, asylum-seekers are forced to ask to speak and to be listened to, to ask for a shared sense of humanity. The response to these questions, which should not need to be asked, is denial. As a result, Al Assad's narrator sews their lips in what functions as a retreat from the community of speech. Of course, this analysis begs a crucial question: how can the necessarily silent withdrawal from speech be an announcement, a word that evokes speech and language? What is an unspoken announcement? How does Al Assad's narrator ask for attention from the observer through lips sewn together and purposefully silenced? That the silence functions to stage a refusal is more easily understood, as staging does not require speech in the same way. But what communication can be done through this staging? In turning to the reception of the protests, I next aim to address these crucial questions.

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[150] Bargu, 13.

Hearing the silence

Many scholarly analyses of lip-sewing as a form of protest among refugees and asylum-seekers have gotten stuck in the question of whether or not it is an example of agency. For example, drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory of action, which requires a linking of action and speech, Ayten Gündoğdu discounts the political agency of refugees sewing their lips together because it is not accompanied by speech[151]. On the contrary, Nithya Rajan understands lip-sewing as a display of agency because refugees are controlling the narrative of their representation and challenging depictions of themselves as helpless[152]. Whether or not lip-sewing can be considered an expression of agency becomes the central argument, which hinders an examination of whether the form of protest challenges the silencing and depoliticization of asylum-seekers.

In my analysis of the response to the protests, I ask whether the Australian government responded to the protests as an expression of agency, and how this is reflected in their response. In the above section, I laid out an understanding of the lip-sewing protests at Woomera as 'messages' through which asylum-seekers made appeals and asked to be listened to. Next, I evaluate this claim by turning to an analysis of whether these messages were able to be 'heard' in the political realm. Through an evaluation of the governmental response to the protests, I argue that it becomes clear that the government heard their claims and appeals, and felt a need to respond. The Howard administration, including the Prime Minister himself, repeatedly commented directly on the protests. The government of Australia responded to the protest, but certainly not by sympathizing with or acknowledging their claims. Nor did the government

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[151] Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*.
[152] Rajan, "What Do Refugees Want?"

attempt to deflect from or rebut the demands or grievances of the protestors. Instead, it

responded via a tactic of delegitimizing the protests. In the following, I will examine how the

government attempted to recharacterize and delegitimize the protests.

Tactics of delegitimization

The Australian government played on widespread racialized xenophobia, the history of

which was covered in earlier sections, to frame the protests at Woomera as arising from cultural

difference on the part of protestors. Immigration Minister Ruddock emphasized this framing,

calling lip-sewing "a practice unknown in our culture…that offends the sensitivity of

Australians"[153]. This led to a public debate in Australia about whether the instances of lip-

sewing could be attributed to cultural practices of the Middle East. Banu Bargu notes that

understandings of self-destruction practices have strong historical associations with religious

fanaticism, especially associated with Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam[154]. In the wake of 9/11,

the linkage between extremist Islam and acts of self-destruction became widespread, often with

inflammatory and racist implications. Ron Hoenig argues that the emphasis on respect for law, as

seen in the government's demonization of the protestors for trying to 'manipulate' or

'undermine' the country's immigration policy, establishes a racialized dynamic whereby "respect

for the law is constructed as a crucial difference between the Muslim detainees and the 'ordinary

decent Australian'"[155]. Hoenig notes that some journalists reporting on lip sewing protests at

Curtin, another detention facility, described protestors as Muslim or Middle Eastern while

admitting that they had not spoken to the detainees and therefore could not have confirmed these

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[153] As quoted in Wolfram Cox and Minahan, "Unravelling Woomera," 294.

[154] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 21.

[155] Hoenig, "Reading Alien Lips : Australian Print Media Depictions of Asylum Seekers and the Construction of National Identity," 143.

assumptions[156]. Hoenig found a pattern in reporting on such protests, in which protestors were referred to only by geographical origin or religious identity[157]. Islamophobia was employed to recharacterize and delegitimize the protest – the protest was reduced to a symptom of the protestors' cultural background.

An additional tactic of delegitimization used by the government, was to repeatedly accuse the protestors as attempting to 'intimidate' or 'manipulate' the Australian government and public. The government attempted to point to the protests as an effort to bully the government into giving protestors what they wanted. In so doing, the government acknowledged, and even highlighted, the agency of the protests. However, the government also attempted to diminish this agency through concerted efforts to push the protests outside the political realm. This was done by framing the protests as outside of politics, in the sense that the protestors' demands and grievances were not voiced through any 'proper' political channels. Immigration Minister Ruddock repeatedly made it clear to the media that the government considered the protests to be attempts at intimidation, and therefore should have no influence on policy. By suggesting that the protestors were trying to undermine or manipulate policy, government officials foreclosed the possibility of understanding the protests as an attempt to comment on or intervene in the debate over the country's immigration policy. Additionally, the protestors were framed as lawless, in the sense that they were trying to subvert the established legal and political processes for gaining immigration status. As Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock analogized it,

> "there are some people who do not accept the umpire's decision, and believe that inappropriate behavior will influence people like you and me, who have certain values, who

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[156] Hoenig, 142.
[157] Hoenig, 142.

have certain views about human rights, who believe in the sanctity of life, and are concerned when people say, "If you don't give me what I want, I'm going to cut my wrists"[158].

Richard Bailey explains that in Ruddock's commentary, "the 'umpire's decision' represents a 'properly constituted' legal process set in place by a 'properly elected' government"[159]. In the government's framing, because the protestors were not bringing their complaints and demands to the proper channels, their commentary should be treated as illegitimate. Further, the protest is seen as lawless, in its attempts to undermine the established legal structure of immigration. This framing is supplemented by the attribution of their protest to a symptom of cultural difference. By calling the form of protest a 'practice unknown in our culture', the government further delegitimizes the protest. Not only does the Australian government assert that the protest is politically and legally illegitimate, they also signal that it is culturally illegitimate.

The Distribution of the Sensible

What is at stake in the government's attempts at delegitimization is the existence of politics, in the sense meant by Jacques Ranciere. Ranciere argues that the essence of the political is "the making contentious of the givens of a particular situation"[160]. The 'givens' of a situation is the way it has been established by political powers. Ranciere also refers to the givens of a situation as the distribution of the sensible, which Yates McKee describes as the "the division of the realm of public appearances erected by particular regimes between properly political subjects and those whose voices can only register as subhuman 'noise'"[161] (McKee, 322). This is the division the Australian government is enacting. Their recharacterization of the protests as politically illegitimate maintains their boundary between what is a proper versus improper

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[158] As quoted in Bailey, "Strategy, Rupture, Rights," 51.
[159] Bailey, 51.
[160] Ranciere and Panagia, "Dissenting Words," 124.
[161] Yates McKee, "On Climate Refugees," 322.

political subject. The government attempts to maintain agreement about and control over what counts as the properly political subject. Asylum-seekers and refugees around the world have been relegated to the wrong side of the division of public appearances; they have been so excluded from the realm of the proper political subject that their speech registers only as 'subhuman noise'. Under humanitarian governance, as seen in chapter one, their speech does not register. The givens of humanitarian governance are such that its subjects are expected only to produce sounds of suffering, the signs of complete victimhood. In the case of Australian's governance of asylum-seekers, the division is even more readily apparent. Asylum-seekers are literally placed out of the realm of public appearance in remote or even offshore processing centers, far from the view of Australian citizens and media, support groups, or legal services.

It is a situation of radical exclusion from the realm of public appearances, and a situation in which any effort to speak is responded to only as subhuman noise. It is in this situation that the protestors find it necessary to resort to such an extreme act of protest as lip sewing. Ranciere's theory of the distribution of the sensible helps explain how such protest challenges the extremity of their radical exclusion. For Ranciere, the political only persists if there remains contention around the distribution of "what is seen and what might be said, [and] on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given"[162]. I argue that the lip sewing protests represent this contention about the established distribution of the sensible. It is a challenge made towards the pre-established division between speech and 'noise' or 'sound'. The speech of the asylum-seekers and refugees registered only as sound. Their lip-sewing protests re-enacts this silencing, and also refuses participation in a speech community that has divided speech and sound in that way. At lip sewing protests against the destruction of the migrant camp in Calais, France,

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[162] Ranciere and Panagia, "Dissenting Words," 124.

refugees asked "Will you listen now?" on signs or in press releases[163]. Asking this question forces a recognition that their speech had previously been registered only as noise; moreover, it signals the protestors intention to have their protest register beyond noise. The protestors' signs or commentary to the news effectively serves as a caption to the image of their sewn lips. This 'caption', which is speech in the traditionally recognized sense, both makes more obvious the idea that they are trying to speak and be listened to, but also emphasizes that the act of lip sewing makes it impossible to 'speak'. These protestors are talking about how they are reduced to sound; they are articulating, in speech, their silencing. The question, 'will you listen now?' places a burden of responsibility on the audience to answer; even a lack of response answers the question.

Ranciere's theory of the distribution of the sensible helps elucidate the process mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, whereby the protestors had to first establish the condition of possibility for expression, prior to their attempt to communicate their message. For Ranciere, political powers affirm 'objective' givens about the distribution of the sensible, or a common field of perception that shapes who can be seen and heard in the political realm, and the preconditions of political action. These powers (Ranciere refers to these powers as the category of the police) conceive of society as "a totality comprised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces"[164]. In Ranciere's theory of politics, this idea of space is crucial: "the principal function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one"[165]. Political powers work to divide spaces where political subjects can appear, and spaces where they do not. As Ranciere notes, political

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[163] Ochs and Werner, "On the Interpretation of Lip Sewing amongst Refugees as Political Action," 2.
[164] Ranciere and Panagia, "Dissenting Words," 124.
[165] Ranciere, Panagia, and Bowlby, "Ten Theses on Politics," 9.

powers revoke political subjectivity by relegating categories of people to a non-political sphere. Women are relegated to a domestic, non-political space. Refugees are relegated to a non-political space, a space of humanitarianism or indefinite detention. The non-political space is one from which "one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speeches demonstrating a shared *aisthesi*s [perception]"[166]. Politics lies in the contestation of the division of these spaces:

> "the politics of these categories has always consisted in re-qualifying these places, in getting them to be seen as the spaces of a community, of getting themselves to be seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation); in short, participants in a common *aisthesis*. It has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared 'good' or 'evil' what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain"[167].

The protests explored in this chapter enact politics, in the sense described by Ranciere, in that they requalify 'what had appeared merely as an expression of pain' as messages, forms of communication. Finding themselves in a space designated as non-political, and especially as non-speaking, the protestors established a different mode of communication. I argue that this mode of communication registered with the political powers, as evidenced by the response of the Australian government. As such, the protests enacted dissensus and insisted on the presence of 'two worlds in one'. The protest, and the emphasis that the protest were messages, showed that what is thought to be the only 'space' of speaking is not the only space. The protests announced that, despite the relegation to the space of 'noise', the protestors were in fact speaking.

In this, there is an invitation to imagine different configurations of a speech community, or to imagine a different distribution of the sensible. As Bargu writes, "while the performance of silence is a withdrawal from the community of speech to which these actors refuse belonging, it

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[166] Ranciere, Panagia, and Bowlby, 10.
[167] Ranciere, Panagia, and Bowlby, 10.

is also a calling forth – an interpellation – of a new community imagined as an alternative to those in existence". Abbas Amini, an Iranian asylum-seeker who sewed his eyes, ears and lips closed in protest in 2003, described the intentions of his protest as such: 'I sewed my eyes so others could see, I sewed my ears so others could hear, I sewed my mouth to give others a voice'[168]. Amini is pointing to the opening up of new possibilities – to his hope that by challenging the current configuration, a new configuration of speaking and hearing roles can come into being. In this description, and in the protests described in this chapter, I see the vision of a new community - where the distribution of the sensible is such that the protestors can be seen and heard, and have voice.

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[168] As quoted in Edkins and Pin-Fat, "Through the Wire," 2.

CONCLUSION

No Friend but the Mountains is an account of writer and refugee Behrouz Boochani's time held in Australian immigration detention on Manus Island. After escaping persecution in his country of origin, Iran, he attempted to enter Australia but was apprehended and sent to immigration detention on the island. During his time in detention, he sent writing to a friend via text messages on a secret contraband phone. The friend would go on to compile the messages and send them to a translator, with whom Boochani would have text conversations about how to best translate the writing. The phone was confiscated twice. Nevertheless, Boochani managed to finish the first draft of the book within six months. In 2019, Boochani won the Victorian Prize for Literature while still detained on Manus Island[169]. New Zealand granted him a visa to speak at a literary festival, and once he left the island, he filed for a claim for protection, which meant Australia could not send him back to detention. He was finally free from the island after 7 years of confinement. In the notes to the book, Boochani writes "I think it's inevitable that for years and years to come I'll end up opening critical spaces for engaging with the phenomenon of Manus Prison . . . this work will attract every humanities and social science discipline; it will create a new philosophical language"[170].

The phenomenon of 'states of exception' inhabited by refugees has certainly attracted a great deal of scholarship, a small fraction of which I explored in chapter one. This scholarship has correctly and crucially identified the ways in which these spaces are constructed to exclude refugees from the realm of politics. However, this scholarship is unfortunately dominated by a pessimism about the ability to resist this depoliticization. With this project, I hope to open up a

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[169]Stack, "Behrouz Boochani Just Wants to Be Free."

[170] Boochani, Tofighian, and Flanagan, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 19.

critical space for engagement with the phenomenon of refugee protest, to open up what I assert is an overly narrow approach to evaluating these protests and their ability to challenge depoliticization. I argue that crucial to this effort is a different understanding of the function of protest within these spaces.

In an analysis of the Concerned Women Protests at Buduburam, I demonstrated how the protestors explicitly framed the protest in terms which centered the contestation of speaking and hearing roles. Through pointing out the ways in which the humanitarian governance of the camp privileged and legitimized certain interlocuteurs, the protestors made contentious the camp administration's claim that they were given opportunities to make their voices heard. They positioned their protest as an intervention in the distribution of these speaking roles within the camp, and established speaking and being heard as central to challenging the conditions of the camp. In insisting that the protest represented their 'day of speaking,' they refused to acquiesce to this existing distribution. The protestors demonstrated and emphasized that the condition of the refugee camp is one of being silenced. Challenging these conditions is challenging the silencing. I argued that this framing gives a different lens through which to understand refugee protest.

This is the lens with which I turned to an analysis of the lip-sewing protests at Woomera Immigration Detention Center. This chapter entered into an academic conversation about whether lip-sewing can be considered a speech act or a political act. I illustrated how the protestors used their embodied protest to send messages; this is political in the sense meant by Jacques Ranciere in that it enacts a dissensus over the distribution of speech and silence. Through literally embodying silence and insisting that they were communicating through this silence, the protestors complicated understandings of what it means to speak. I claim that the

government of Australia 'heard' the message communicated by the protest, evidenced by their attempt to delegitimize the protests. At question in these efforts is the government's control over the 'distribution of the sensible.' Echoing Ranciere, I see the contestation of this distribution as the manifestation of politics.

Thus, in response to the dominant scholarship which theorizes the refugee camp or detention center as depoliticized, I argue that the protests are actually the essence of the political. The communicative and symbolic function of protest communicates a condition of being silenced. In my analysis of the protest, I center the voice which announces that it has been given no voice, speech which articulates the inability to speak, silence which screams the silencing. The project of reading refugee protests as the enactment of the political is crucial for widening our understanding of political subjectivity. This framework can be extended to the protest or action of other politically marginalized subjects. It is an endeavor to find language with which to identify politics as happening where many would claim there is not politics. Recognizing contestations of the established order in protest allows for a much wider reading of the value of protest.

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