

Slow Resistance: Resisting the Slow Violence of Asylum

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Abstract

In this article we seek to expand on the developing interest in Slow Violence and how it relates to immigration and asylum, by exploring how such violence is resisted. Following Foucault's insight that in order to better understand power, it helps to study resistance to it, we draw on original research into acts of protest by refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, and connect this to existing research on experiences of and resistance to the UK asylum system. In so doing we offer 'Slow Resistance' as a potentially useful concept with which to understand resistance not just to a particular configuration of power relations, but to a particular form of violence. The conceptual utility of Slow Resistance lies in its ability to illuminate: the particular operations of power/violence in the UK asylum system; the multiple forms of resistance to this violence/power; how these forms of resistance may be connected (thus discouraging the 'silo-ing' of analysing different forms of resistance); and how time is creatively engaged with by such forms of resistance. If, as has been argued, a particular challenge of slow violence is representational – how to devise arresting images and stories adequate to this form of violence – then resistance has the potential to focus our attention on it, and to gradually prepare the ground for meaningful change. While developed here in relation to the UK asylum system, slow resistance is a concept that we think can be useful in a wide range of contexts in which slow violence operates.

Keywords

asylum, refugees, resistance, protest, slow violence, UK

We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. [. . .] A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects.¹

1. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

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Introduction

The relationship of asylum seekers to immigration control, borders, and asylum systems is often conceptualised in terms of sovereign abandonment, constitutive exclusion, and a politics of the exception, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben.² According to this framework, asylum seekers, refugees, and other non-citizens with precarious or irregular status exist within a state of exception created by the operation of the sovereign right to distinguish the included – politically-qualified life (*bios*) – from the excluded – ‘bare life’ (*zoe*) – leaving those excluded outside of the protection of the law, abandoned to ‘the camp’. Being abandoned to the state of exception, it is claimed, acts to rule out the very possibility of resistance.³

However, although asylum seekers and refugees certainly maintain a precarious position in relation to law and rights, rarely is it the case that they are condemned to an existence completely outside of the law, subject to its whims and violence but unable to claim its protection. The fact that the reality appears more complex than the theory implies is not, of course, a reason to dispense with the theory – sovereign abandonment can be the *aim* of the sovereign even if this abandonment is not realised fully in practice. Rather, it presents an opportunity to examine these murkier waters more closely to see if we can gain some insight into the operation of power and violence in relation to those who the state would like to exclude.

This article takes up this task in relation to the UK asylum system and explores refugee and asylum seeker resistance to a particular form of violence – Slow Violence – which is itself the outcome of a particular configuration of power relations. Following Foucault’s argument that if we want to understand the operation of power, we should begin by investigating forms of resistance,⁴ we seek to contribute to existing research on refugee and asylum seeker activism in Politics and International Relations (IR) by explicitly drawing on the emerging field of Resistance Studies, and we put forward Slow Resistance as an umbrella concept through which to understand the resistance of individuals subjected not just to a particular form of power, but to a particular form of *violence* – Slow Violence. While it could be argued that resistance is not possible under a relationship of violence,⁵ we hope to show in this article that Slow Violence is not,

2. Jonathan Darling, ‘Becoming Bare Life: Asylum, Hospitality, and the Politics of Encampment’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 4 (2009): 649–65; Bülent Diken, ‘From Refugee Camps to Gated Communities: Biopolitics and the End of the City’, *Citizenship Studies* 8, no. 1 (2004): 83–106; Jenny Edkins, ‘Sovereign Power, Zones of Indistinction, and the Camp’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 25, no. 1 (2000): 3–25; Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat, ‘Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 1–24; Fiona Jenkins, ‘Bare Life: Asylum-Seekers, Australian Politics and Agamben’s Critique of Violence’, *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 1 (2004): 79–95; Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, ‘The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer: Migration and Detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand’, *International Migration* 42, no. 1 (2004): 33–64.

3. Darling, ‘Becoming Bare Life’, 651.

4. Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 3: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 1994), 329.

5. Edkins and Pin-Fat, ‘Through the Wire’.

strictly speaking, a relationship, but is, rather, the outcome/effect of a particular configuration of power relations. We seek, thus, both to move beyond the more popular frameworks of Critical Citizenship Studies and Arendtian public-political action that characterise much work on migrant resistance, and also to contribute a potentially fruitful concept to the emerging field of Resistance Studies by exploring the connection between a particular form of violence and forms of resistance. Drawing initially on our own research into public acts of resistance undertaken by refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, and then connecting this work with existing research on more hidden acts of resistance, we aim to show how these different forms of resistance have a common target in the Slow Violence to which asylum seekers are subjected by the particular configuration of sovereign-, disciplinary-, bio- and necropower that characterises the asylum system in the UK. Understanding these diverse resistance practices specifically as Slow Resistance draws attention to the multiple temporalities involved not only in the infliction of violence by laws supposedly grounded in human rights obligations, but also those temporalities involved in different resistance practices and their effects.⁶

To these ends, we outline, in the first section of the article, how the UK asylum system operates, highlighting key aspects of the system that can be understood as enacting slow violence on those caught within its web. In the second section, drawing on Foucault's insight that in order to understand power it helps to study resistance to it, we outline how the various resistance practices of refugees and asylum seekers shed further light on the forms of power operating in the UK asylum system, and the Slow Violence that is their effect. In the third section we draw on resources from the emerging field of Resistance Studies to supplement approaches that have proven more popular within scholarship in Politics and IR on migrant resistance. We then, in the final section, unpack 'Slow Resistance' as an umbrella concept which can bring together the approaches examined in section three and which we can use to better understand resistance under conditions of Slow Violence.

Slow Violence and the UK Asylum System

In 1999 the UK asylum system was radically overhauled with the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999). The first of a number of Immigration Acts which have produced a steadily more restrictive environment for asylum seekers in the UK,⁷ the

6. The role, and use, of time/temporality is an emerging area of research in studies of resistance. See, for example Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Mona Lilja, 'The Politics of Time and Temporality in Foucault's Theorisation of Resistance: ruptures, time lags and decelerations,' *Journal of Political Power* 11, no. 3 (2018): 419-32; Mona Lilja et al., '(Re)thinking the Precarity of Swedish Migrants: Governing through Decelerations and Timescapes', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 32, no. 1 (2019): 144-61; J. Sorenson and K. Wiksell, 'Constructive Resistance to the Dominant Capitalist Temporality,' *Sociologisk Forskning* 56, no. 3-4 (2019): 253-74.

7. Yasmin Ibrahim and Anita Howarth, 'Review of Humanitarian Refuge in the United Kingdom: Sanctuary, Asylum, and the Refugee Crisis', *Politics & Policy* 46, no. 3 (2018): 348-91.

1999 Act introduced a dispersal system for asylum applicants in need of housing and material support, sending them away from London and the south-east of England. The Act removed asylum seekers from the mainstream welfare benefits system and established a separate system for them: the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute can file a claim for support from NASS, and receive housing offered on a no-choice basis in one of a number of dispersal zones throughout the UK. Such housing was initially provided through contracts between the Home Office and local councils, but since 2006 a new housing contract model was introduced which has moved progressively away from partnerships with public sector providers. As of 2012, housing contracts were handed over entirely to private companies, including Serco and G4S, muddying the waters of accountability and responsibility in relation to housing provision and conditions. Housing tends to be provided in properties that are deemed to be ‘hard to let’, in more economically deprived areas of the UK, and the sub-standard conditions of such housing has been subject to fierce criticism.⁸

In addition to housing, asylum seekers may also be entitled, if they have no assets or other means of support from family or friends, to a weekly allowance of £39.63 to cover essential living expenses – the cost of clothes, food, toiletries, and travel. This allowance is, at the time of writing, less than half of the baseline welfare support payment (Universal Credit) that can be claimed by an unemployed British citizen, and is their only source of income. In 2002 the right of asylum seekers to work while their claim is examined was removed. The right to work was partially reinstated in 2005, for those waiting more than 12 months for a decision on their claim, but has been limited since 2010 to jobs on the UK Shortage Occupations List, which is a list of highly specialised jobs including ‘skilled classical ballet dancer’, ‘skilled orchestral musician’, archaeologist, and geophysicist.⁹ Many asylum seekers will not hold the requisite qualifications or experience for such jobs and so the list becomes a *de facto* barrier to legal employment, leaving those in the asylum system completely dependent on the support provided by the Home Office.

8. David Bolt, ‘An Inspection of the Home Office’s Management of Asylum Accommodation Provision: February–June 2018’, (London: Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2018). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/757285/ICIBI_An_inspection_of_the_HO_management_of_asylum_accommodation.pdf. Last accessed December 21, 2021; Jonathan Darling, ‘Asylum in Austere Times: Instability, Privatization and Experimentation within the UK Asylum Dispersal System’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016): 483–505; House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, ‘COMPASS: Provision of Asylum Accommodation – Fifty-Fourth Report of Session 2013-2014’ (London: House of Commons, 24 April 2014). Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpubacc/1000/1000.pdf>. Last accessed December 7, 2021; Migrant Voice, ‘A Place to Call Home: A Report on Housing Conditions for Asylum Seekers in Birmingham and the West Midlands’ (Birmingham: Migrant Voice, 2017); Scottish Refugee Council, ‘The Extent and Impact of Asylum Accommodation Problems in Scotland - Executive Summary’ (Glasgow: Scottish Refugee Council, 2014).

9. Home Office, ‘Immigration Rules Appendix K: Shortage Occupation List – Immigration Rules – Guidance – GOV.UK’, 4 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-k-shortage-occupation-list>. Last accessed December 7, 2021.

The legal process of seeking asylum in the UK is often a long and difficult one. Formal legislation creates broad powers and duties for the UK government, but the specifics, and implementation, of these powers and duties are in the Immigration Rules presented for review to Parliament by the Home Secretary, and these change constantly. The complexity of the process increased with the Hostile Environment policy introduced in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May. Expressly designed to, in May's own words, 'create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants,'¹⁰ the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts expanded border controls throughout Britain to everyday life activities by requiring banks, hospitals, schools and landlords to do basic immigration checks on anyone trying to access services, essentially deputising citizens as part of the UK border apparatus. These changes were designed to make life without secure immigration status as difficult as possible, within a very restrictive interpretation of human rights obligations, to achieve two main policy goals: to discourage would-be asylum seekers and irregularised migrants from coming to Britain, and to make staying in the UK for those without leave to remain so hostile that they will voluntarily leave. Although the Home Office has attempted to relabel the 'hostile environment' as the 'compliant environment', since 2017, the logic – and legislation – of the hostile environment remain firmly in place. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the operation of the detention system.

While navigating the labyrinth of Immigration Rules in pursuit of refugee status, asylum seekers in the UK live under the constant threat of detention. The UK, at the time of writing, is the only European country with no time limit on detention, except the detention of pregnant women which is limited to 72 hours. Successive Immigration Acts since 1999 have expanded the Home Secretary's powers to detain those without leave to remain. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the UK has one of the largest detention estates in Europe, with around 25,000 individuals going through detention in any given year.¹¹ There are currently nine detention centres in the UK, and most are run by private contractors, including the UK subsidiary of American private prison company GEO Group, who also run the migrant camp at Guantanamo Bay.

Slow Violence

From the description above, UK asylum policy might appear relatively benign. While levels of support are low, support is at least provided. There is little evidence to indicate that state agents commit overt acts of violence towards asylum seekers as a matter of routine. To be sure, acts of direct violence certainly do occur – the process of deportation is often extremely violent and has resulted in deaths of deportees – but the idea of Slow Violence enables us to see forms of violence that are less immediate, less spectacular, and less direct. Coined by Rob Nixon in relation to environmental degradation and climate change, Slow Violence denotes a particular kind of violence 'that occurs gradually

10. Amelia Hill, "'Hostile Environment': The Hardline Home Office Policy Tearing Families Apart", *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart>. Last accessed December 7, 2021.

11. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Immigration Detention: Fourteenth Report of Session 2017-2019' (London: House of Commons, 2019), 12.

and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.¹² We can see what is at stake here in Nixon's use of the term 'long dying' to describe the process of slow, gradual wounding of individuals by the pollution caused by use of toxic ballistics, of the habitat degradation caused by climate change, or of abject poverty. We argue here that a similar slow, gradual wounding, which leaves significant and long-lasting impacts on asylum seekers, is inflicted by the structure of the UK asylum system.¹³

Slow Violence shares several affinities with Johann Galtung's famous concept of structural violence, which foregrounds how large, impersonal structures can not only give rise to acts of personal violence, but also constitute forms of violence in and of themselves. Where Slow Violence becomes a more useful framing for the analysis in this article is in its explicit foregrounding of the temporality of such forms of violence. Structural violence, Galtung writes, 'is silent, it does not show – it is essentially static, it *is* the tranquil waters' on which the dynamic waves of personal violence move.¹⁴ While Galtung does not claim that structures themselves are unchanging, Nixon's Slow Violence draws our attention much more directly and explicitly to how structural forms of violence can build up over many years, even generations; to how the harms inflicted may occur at a significant delay – hence becoming 'decoupled' – from an original cause. The system put in place by the 1999 Act has profound long-term effects on the physical and mental health of asylum seekers. They suffer shame at poverty and reliance on charity, stress, anxiety, humiliation, fear, isolation, weight loss, hunger, poverty, and health problems.¹⁵ Slow Violence draws our attention to the many kinds of harm that affect individuals and communities for which it is difficult to assign blame not just because their source may be in large, impersonal structures, but because the harms themselves happen at a *pace* that is itself perhaps too slow to assign blame. To clarify, neither Nixon nor Galtung claim that there are never specific agents who are identifiably involved in the creation of structures that inflict harm – such as successive Home Secretaries. However, where the notion of Slow Violence becomes useful is in allowing us to see how a time lag between the creation/implementation of such policies, such as the hostile environment (and the infrastructures that enact and facilitate it) and the experience of harm by those caught within the system can make it difficult to read these harms as 'violence'. By naming these harms as Slow Violence we can, perhaps, reverse the anaesthetising effect of these time lags and recognise these harms precisely as *violence that occurs slowly, gradually, and in attritional form*.

Lucy Mayblin has turned to Nixon's Slow Violence in order to 'make sense' of the hostile environment for asylum seekers and irregularised migrants in the UK, to enable us to see as *violence* the harm done to asylum seekers by laws which are,

12. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

13. British Red Cross and Refugee Survival Trust, 'How Will We Survive? Steps to Preventing Destitution in the UK Asylum System. (October 2021). Available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/dass-how-will-we-survive>. Last accessed December 7, 2021.

14. Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 173.

15. British Red Cross and Refugee Survival Trust, 'How Will We Survive?'

ostensibly, in place to uphold the UK's human rights obligations to those seeking asylum.¹⁶ Mayblin explores how asylum seekers *experience* the UK asylum system as a form of violence that is the outcome, or effect, of a necro-political system in which those marked for exclusion by the state are nevertheless kept alive by the sovereign but in a state of injury. Necropolitics is the term coined by Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, as the sinister side of Michel Foucault's biopolitics/biopower – a politics of life and form of power in which the responsibility of government is to foster the life of the population.¹⁷ In developing this more sinister side of a politics of life, Mbembe conceptualises the notion of the 'death world' – a form of social existence in which populations are 'subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.'¹⁸ Those who inhabit these death worlds are 'kept alive but in a state of injury.'¹⁹ Necropolitics can be thought of, then, as the politics (or governance) of the 'letting die' in Foucault's characterisation of biopolitics as 'making live and letting die'. This is a particularly useful way of understanding the effects on asylum seekers of the UK asylum system. The UK asylum system can be understood as a complex web of power relations which enacts a particular form of *violence* on those caught within it. The sovereign power of law acts at once to exclude asylum seekers from the most extensive protection of the law, but also keeps them suspended within a separate system of law which acts to ensure their barest physical survival but nothing else. Simultaneously, this same system is both bio- and necro-political, in the sense that those caught within the web of the asylum system are consigned to necropolitical death worlds in which they are kept alive but in a state of injury, for the sake of the life and flourishing of the British public. This combination of sovereign, bio- and necro-power seeks to render docile and compliant those subjects caught within its web. This docility is, ultimately, achieved through the slow, gradual, almost imperceptible infliction of violence, that is itself grounded in a particular configuration of sovereign, bio- and necro-power.

Slow Violence does, however, pose a particular representational challenge for those who seek to counter it: if slow violence is difficult to register and to perceive as *violence*, how can we draw attention to it so as to counter it? Or, as Nixon puts it: how can we 'devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects'.²⁰ Precisely because of the nature of Slow Violence, it not only often fails to register as violence to observers, but it also renders resistance itself difficult; difficult but, importantly, not impossible. Being able to recognise such resistance, and the multiple forms it takes, is, we argue, an important step in meeting this representational challenge.

16. Lucy Mayblin, Mustafa Wake, and Mohsen Kazemi, 'Necropolitics and the Slow Violence of the Everyday: Asylum Seeker Welfare in the Postcolonial Present', *Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2020): 107–23.

17. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), 254–63.

18. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40. Emphasis in original

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.

Resistance and Slow Violence

One place to begin to address this representational challenge is with resistance practices that are more overt and public. We draw here on original research into refugee and asylum seeker protest in Scotland. We follow Lilja and Vinthagen in understanding resistance as ‘a response to power from below – a practice that might challenge, negotiate, and undermine power, or a practice performed on behalf of and/or in solidarity with a subaltern.’²¹ Public protest is, thus, a particular resistance *practice*, but is not the only such practice. While we focus in this section on public protest as a resistance practice, we later attempt to connect this with other resistance practices, to draw out how a particular form of violence caused by a particular configuration of power relations characterising the UK asylum system is resisted.

A key dispersal zone in the UK asylum system, Scotland – and the Glasgow area in particular – has consistently hosted significant numbers of asylum seekers made dependent on the support provided by the UK government. In the context of a research project exploring the extent and nature of political activism of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland since the introduction of the dispersal system, we initially gathered data from Nexis UK searches of local and national media outlets to identify incidents of protest by refugees and asylum seekers across Scotland since 1999 (until August 2019). We began with the broadest possible search terms – ‘protest’ and ‘refugees’ and ‘Scotland’, or ‘protest’ and ‘asylum’ and ‘Scotland’ – to identify possible protests. This resulted in a number of different articles written about the same protest. These articles were retained to compare the reporting and to ascertain as much information as possible on the protest, as different media outlets may focus on different aspects of a protest. No news outlets were excluded from the search parameters, but not all news outlets contained reporting on protests and thus returned no search results. Articles were, nevertheless, found in a broad range of local and national newspapers and news sites including *The Guardian* (national – UK), *The Times* (national – UK), BBC (national – UK), *The Daily Mirror* (national – UK), *The Express* (national – UK), *The Scotsman* (national – Scotland), *The Scottish Daily Mail* (national – Scotland), *The Evening Times* (local – Glasgow), and *The Herald* (local – Glasgow). We also found, however, that a number of protests *against* refugees and asylum seekers were included in this initial sample, due to the broad nature of the initial search. These reports were excluded if they did not also contain information about refugee and asylum seeker protest or information on refugees and asylum seekers involved in these protests. The initial searches were then supplemented with more targeted searches of Nexis UK, electronic archives of the identified newspapers (where available) and of social media (including Twitter and Facebook) and other online platforms (including Detained Voices, and Commonsense), using more targeted search terms relating to specific dates, places, events, and groups. Such targeted searches were often necessary due to limitations in reporting. Some reports, for example, referenced a connected protest that had not been the subject of prior reporting, and so we needed to look elsewhere for information on such actions.

21. Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen, ‘Dispersed Resistance: Unpacking the Spectrum and Properties of Glaring and Everyday Resistance,’ *Journal of Political Power* 11, no. 2 (2018): 215.

A total of 299 unique instances of protest were identified in these reports, from which we were then able to group protests, through an inductive process, into broad categories by issue: Immigration Control; Housing; Detention; Solidarity and Rights; Violence towards refugees and asylum seekers; Asylum Policy, UK Foreign Policy, and World Politics.²² This inductive process made use of the slogans and statements of those protesting (where these were available), and the contextual reporting about the protest, in order to identify the concrete issue/event/legislation on which it was focused, and these were then grouped together into categories by identifying common themes. These categories should not, however, be seen as mutually exclusive since these issues are, as shown above, connected in the everyday lives of asylum seekers. For example, Immigration Control, as a category, was established on the basis of a range of different issues identified in the protests relating to the ability of individuals to enter and remain in the UK including visas/regularisation, deportation and dawn raids, with Detention being its own category. In practice, those taken from their homes during a dawn raid are often taken to detention centres pending deportation, and so it may seem illegitimate to separate Immigration Control from Detention. In a handful of protests there was overlap – an individual in detention protesting their impending deportation, for example. We decided to include such protests in the Immigration Control category since they related to the ability of such an individual to remain in the UK. Those protests included in the Detention category were actions which focused on detention as a policy, on the conditions of detention, and on the indefinite nature of detention. Similarly, while detention, housing, and immigration control are all aspects of asylum policy, the number of protests targeting these specific aspects individually merited their creation as separate categories. Asylum Policy, then, included only the very small number of protests that were targeted at more general aspects of the UK asylum system, such as dispersal or welfare support. Where protests appeared to address more than one category these were coded as a combination of categories: for example, Detention/Housing.

Protests were recorded in every year since the introduction of the dispersal policy, but some years witnessed spikes in the number of protests, as can be seen in Figure C in the Appendix. This was particularly the case in years when housing contracts in Glasgow changed (in 2006, 2011, 2012, and 2019), and when more aggressive immigration control strategies, such as dawn raids, were adopted or intensified (such as in 2005 and 2006). The protests also took a variety of different forms, including public demonstrations, protest marches, direct action appeals, petitions and public letters, hunger strikes and self-immolation.²³ While actions taking place in public spaces were the most common form of protests (public demonstrations constituted 53% of protests, for example), social media was also used as a key site and resource of resistance, particularly in efforts to prevent the deportation of specific individuals (what we have called ‘direct action appeals’). Many of the protests were concentrated in the dispersal city of Glasgow, but

22. For a complete list of protests, and for a breakdown of protests by year, issue, location, and type, please refer to the Methodological Appendix. Figure B breaks down the protests by issue.

23. See Appendix Figure D for a breakdown of protest by type; and Figure G for protest by type and issue.

protests also occurred across Scotland.²⁴ Before examining in closer detail some of these protests, and their connections to other, less public, resistance practices, we briefly address what we might learn about the operation of power and violence in the UK asylum system from these broad trends in public practices of resistance.

While our research clearly shows a significant degree of public protest by refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, this resistance does not seem to be characterised by a high degree of organisation, or coordination across time or issue. Protests have occurred in every year since the introduction of the dispersal system, but there is not a consistent level of protest – there are spikes in different years in relation to different issues, which indicates a more responsive/tactical rather than long-term strategic nature of this type of activism.²⁵ The main issues targeted by refugees and asylum seekers in our research were those directly relating to the asylum system: immigration control (such as dawn raids and deportation), detention (including detention conditions), and housing (particularly the management of the housing contracts). This might give the impression of a coordinated strategy of resistance to the asylum system as a whole. However, when examining the protests, and groups involved, more closely it was difficult to discern any such strategy. The overwhelming majority of the protests were very clearly targeted at specific issues such as housing, detention and immigration control. Although references to the hostile environment, violations of human rights, and dehumanisation were common, we could not discern the development of a distinct movement or campaign uniting asylum seekers across Scotland, across issues, and across time. This may, in part, be due to the nature of the evidence available. News reporting focused on a protest may not capture all forms of resistance undertaken by refugees and asylum seekers. However, while refugees and asylum seekers have developed Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), and are key participants in ‘integration networks’, research into these RCOs and integration networks similarly does not reveal the development of a distinct refugee and asylum seeker social movement. The reporting on the protests did highlight a small number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) consistently involved with protests – particularly public demonstrations – including Positive Action in Housing, Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees, Stop Detention Scotland, the Scottish Refugee Council, and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. However, although many of these groups have coordinated in relation to specific aspects of the UK asylum system – such as campaigns to Lift the Ban on the right to work, or efforts to end indefinite detention – these actions remained organised around, and targeted against, specific nodes on the web of the asylum system, remained time-limited, and have not yet coalesced into what we might consider a coherent and sustained *social movement* against the hostile environment as a whole. Some of the longer-term actions taken by such NGOs are geared, rather, toward enabling the survival of asylum seekers. Positive Action in Housing, for example, has emerged as an important actor in relation to providing adequate housing for asylum seekers, initiating a campaign around Rooms for Refugees – where members of the community sign up to offer accommodation to asylum seekers in need of housing.

24. See Appendix Figure E for a breakdown of protest by location.

25. Appendix Figure F provides insight into protest issue over each year investigated.

There appears, then, to be a great deal of public/overt resistance by asylum seekers and refugees – in contrast to the picture of powerless individuals cast into abjection – but this kind of activism does not seem to be organised, sustained, or coordinated across time. Following Foucault’s injunction to study power by focusing on resistance to it, we can ask what this public but uncoordinated protest might have to tell us about the nature of the power relations in which asylum seekers are suspended and the forms of violence they are exposed to? Coordinated action which is sustained across time requires resources in the form of time, energy, money, support, and personal security. Lacking secure immigration status affects the availability of each of these resources. Being prohibited from working might lead one to assume that asylum seekers have nothing but time on their hands. However, surviving in the hostile environment takes significant time and effort. The asylum seekers interviewed for Mayblin’s study, for example, spoke of having to spend an entire day on grocery shopping. To stretch their meagre allowance as far as possible, interviewees reported spending hours walking between shops trying to locate the cheapest provisions.²⁶ If a visit to the doctor was needed, and they lacked money to use public transport, they would often have to walk – a journey that could take hours, depending on the distance between their housing and the hospital. Weekly or biweekly reporting to the Home Office also takes up considerable time. Sometimes an entire day needs to be given up travelling and waiting in line for a single brief reporting session. Where an excess of time is often felt by asylum seekers is in relation to the amount of time spent waiting for status, but this does not necessarily translate into an excess of time to devote to activism.²⁷ This time is more likely to be devoted to surviving in the hostile environment. Status precarity also makes it difficult to coordinate and sustain action. We noted numerous instances of self-organised asylum seeker protest, but the prevalence of detention in the UK system, and the vulnerability of failed asylum seekers to deportation forms a considerable obstacle to long-term organising.

One might expect to see NGOs stepping in to take a leading role in organising and coordinating resistance to the hostile environment. They do play an important role in providing some measure of protection during demonstrations to protestors with precarious immigration status, but many NGOs are concentrated, out of necessity and the impact of austerity politics, on supporting the day-to-day survival of asylum seekers by providing legal assistance and material support. The activism of asylum seekers, and what seems to be its responsive rather than strategic nature, thus draw attention to the nature of the asylum system as a complex web of laws, regulations, actors and practices, as conduits for sovereign-, disciplinary-, bio- and necro-power, which takes significant time and energy

26. Mayblin et al., ‘Necropolitics’.

27. For a thought-provoking treatment of temporality and waiting in the UK asylum system, see Jennifer Bagelman, ‘Sanctuary: A Politics of Ease?’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 38, no. 1 (2013): 49–62. And for temporality and migration beyond the UK, including practices of resisting this imposed waiting, see Lilja et al., ‘(Re)thinking the Precarity of Swedish Migrants’; Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles, ‘Waiting for What? The Feminization of Asylum in Protracted Situations,’ *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, no. 3 (2011): 361–79; Alison Mountz, ‘Where Asylum Seekers Wait: Feminist Counter-topographies of Sites between States,’ *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, no. 3 (2011): 381–99.

to navigate and survive. Different nodes/points of the web are characterised by specific modalities/technologies of power, or particular combinations of power, and this renders them more or less amenable to challenge via different forms of resistance. This same system, however, makes it extremely difficult to ‘join up’ these forms of resistance and to launch a coordinated assault on the system as a whole. It should also be recognised that, as Carl Death argues, since resistance and power are intimately bound up with each other, forms of resistance, including support by NGOs, ‘rely upon, and are even implicated within, the strategies, techniques and power relationships they oppose,’²⁸ and this similarly makes resistance a challenge.

In the remaining sections of the article, we drill down in more detail into the different forms of resistance engaged in by asylum seekers living under conditions of Slow Violence. We draw on resources from the emerging field of Resistance Studies to supplement approaches that have proven more popular within scholarship in Politics and IR on migrant resistance. We then, in the final section, unpack ‘Slow Resistance’ as an umbrella concept which can bring together the approaches examined in section three and which we can use to better understand resistance under conditions of Slow Violence.

Conceptualising Resistance

Even though the purpose of UK asylum policies is to render asylum seekers docile and disempowered, and these policies succeed in wounding, stigmatising, and marginalising asylum seekers – inflicting Slow Violence on them – what we hope is abundantly clear thus far is that resistance not only occurs, but occurs in a number of different ways, and in relation to a number of different issues. Asylum seekers are wounded, certainly, but they are not rendered completely docile. Our own research has shown that they engage in hunger strikes, in mass demonstrations, and in occupations; they craft petitions and write open letters to ministers; and they use social media to generate action in opposition to impending deportations. Substantively, they target detention, housing, and immigration control, but also broader issues of UK and global politics. Additionally, we have seen that asylum seekers engage in a variety of survival strategies to make their lives in the UK bearable. But how should we understand these, often very different, acts?

Scholarship on the activism/resistance of irregularised migrants within Politics and IR has tended to address these practices through the politics of (non-)citizenship,²⁹ and/or as

28. Carl Death, ‘Counter-Conducts: A Foucauldian Analytics of Protest’, *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3, 240. See also Lucy Mayblin, *Impoverishment and Asylum: Social Policy as Slow Violence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020): 75-94.

29. See for example Cristina Beltran, ‘Going Public: Hannah Arendt, Immigrant Action and the Space of Appearance’, *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (2009): 595-622; Anne McNevin, ‘Political Belonging in a Neoliberal Era: The Struggle of the Sans-Papiers’, *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 2 (2006): 135-51; Anne McNevin, ‘Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and Strategic Possibilities for Political Belonging’, *New Political Science* 31, no. 2 (2009): 163-81; Peter Nyers, ‘Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-Deportation Movement’, *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1069-93; Peter Nyers, ‘No One is Illegal Between City and Nation’, in *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. E. Isin and G. Nielsen (London: Zed Books, 2008), 160-81; Peter Nyers and Kim Rygiel, eds. *Citizenship, Migrant Activism and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2012).

instances of performative rights claiming, drawing heavily on the work of Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler.³⁰ Political movements of non-status migrants agitating for employment rights, and public acts of protest by refugees and asylum seekers – including forms of self-immolation and self-harm – have all been examined from the perspective of a ‘politics of citizenship’. In exercising agency, actors traditionally conceived of as non-political subjects challenge the state’s closely guarded prerogative to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, ‘challenging the drawing of lines between citizens and non-citizens.’³¹ Isin and Nielsen argue that such acts on the part of non-citizen ‘others’ should be understood as ‘Acts of Citizenship’, whereby citizenship is seen as a practice which *creates* citizens, rather than simply as a legal status.³² Public acts of protest, and even the very act of crossing borders in an irregular manner, have been conceptualised as prefigurative acts of cosmopolitan citizenship.³³ Some scholars have, however, cautioned of too great an emphasis being placed on ‘citizenship’ when it comes to the agency of irregularised migrants. Wary of re-affirming its exclusionary logic, both Johnson and McNevin, for example, argue that while many migrant struggles can be understood with reference to citizenship, others cannot and should not be so understood,³⁴ and counsel that we should be attentive to the inherent and potentially powerful ‘ambiguity’ of many migrant rights claims.³⁵

Performative rights claiming relates very closely to Acts of Citizenship. Drawing heavily on an Arendtian understanding of politics as public action in concert, and Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, irregularised migrants who make public demands for the respect of their human rights are doing important ‘rights work’ in appearing in public. Through publicly demanding the rights which they are supposed to already have by virtue of their human status, such claimants of rights reveal an important reality about the supposed universality of rights, and pose an important challenge to states and citizens who publicly profess support for human rights while simultaneously refusing to recognise outsiders as bearers of such rights.³⁶

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30. See for example Ayten Gundogdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anne McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and New Frontiers of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2011).
31. Johnson, *Borders, Asylum, and Global Non-Citizenship*, 196.
32. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, eds., *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2008).
33. Tamara Caraus, ‘Migrant Protests as Acts of Cosmopolitan Citizenship,’ *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 8 (2018): 791-809; Alex Sager, ‘Reclaiming Cosmopolitanism through Migrant Protests’, in *Migration, Protest Movements and the Politics of Resistance*, ed. T. Caraus and E. Paris (London: Routledge, 2017), 171-85.
34. Heather Johnson, ‘These Fine Lines: Locating Non-citizenship in Political Protest in Europe,’ *Citizenship Studies* 19, no. 8 (2015): 951-65.
35. Anne McNevin, ‘Ambivalence and Citizenship: Theorising the Political Claims of Irregular Migrants,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 182-200.
36. Natasha Saunders, ‘Beyond Asylum Claims: Refugee Protest, Responsibility, and Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ *International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 7 (2018): 847-68. See also Natasha Saunders, *International Political Theory and the Refugee Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

What these works often overlook, however, are the *conditions* that might enable such Acts of Citizenship, or instances of performative rights claiming to emerge; if, when, how and why such individual acts might (not) consolidate into a social movement; why certain individuals but not others might engage in such acts; and what, substantively, might connect different Acts of Citizenship. Moreover, these frameworks are perhaps less applicable to actions that are not public, not overtly ‘political’ in nature, and in which the primary goal appears to be survival – there is, in other words, a publicity bias in much of the work noted above (and which our own research also reproduced, but which we hope to counter by drawing out how it connects to other more hidden forms of resistance). Therefore, while our own research focused on acts of protest, revealing that many refugees and asylum seekers are willing to engage in public acts of resistance, it is undeniable that many asylum seekers and others with precarious immigration status are not able or willing to engage in such acts – they may not even be aware of them – and spend their time trying to ‘get by’ in a hostile system. There is a wealth of research by NGOs which highlights these survival strategies, and by academics focused on RCOs and the ways in which they attempt to facilitate integration and belonging in a hostile environment. Much of the substantive work of NGOs in the UK focused on asylum takes the form of service provision under increasingly difficult political and fiscal realities. Similarly, RCOs aim to foster a sense of community, belonging and security to asylum seekers and refugees and help them navigate the hostile environment. This work tends to occur away from the public eye and its focus on the ordinary rather than the exceptional renders it less ‘legible’ to frameworks focused on Acts of Citizenship and performative rights claiming. In the remainder of this section, we seek to show how the conceptual toolbox of the emerging field of Resistance Studies can facilitate a richer analysis and understanding of the variety of (asylum seeker) resistance practices, and how they are connected to each other.

Everyday Resistance

Much of the Slow Violence experienced by asylum seekers is the result of the network of policies known as ‘the hostile/compliant environment’. These rules and regulations are designed to make life without secure immigration status as difficult as possible so that people without secure status will ‘voluntarily leave’. Under such circumstances, we argue, action taken by asylum seekers and their supporters to enable them to survive and to navigate the system cease to be ‘only’ survival strategies and can become a form of Everyday Resistance to Slow Violence and to the forms of power that lie behind it. ‘Everyday Resistance’ was first conceptualised as such by James C. Scott in 1985. Dissatisfied with histories of the peasantry that focused only on rebellion and revolution, and which appeared to consign the peasantry to a passive and anonymous role in the history of class struggle when not engaged in outright rebellion, Scott shifted his focus to analysing what he called ‘everyday forms’ of peasant resistance: ‘the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them.’³⁷ Unlike collective outright defiance, Scott had in mind

37. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi.

‘the *ordinary* weapons of relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth.’ These forms of struggle ‘often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms.’³⁸ While there has been considerable debate within Resistance Studies about whether such everyday forms of resistance should be understood as resistance at all if neither those involved, nor those in power, understand those actors as engaging specifically in *resistance*,³⁹ we follow Vinthagen and Johansson in arguing that what matters is whether or not power relations of some kind (or, as is our focus, forms of violence) *are in fact challenged* through such acts.⁴⁰

Thus, although we do not wish to argue that, in general, there are never any differences between acts of survival and acts of everyday resistance,⁴¹ we do argue that in a context such as the hostile environment, the *purpose* of which is to make the lives of asylum seekers so difficult that they will voluntarily leave, deciding to stay, trying to survive, and attempting to navigate the system becomes an act of everyday resistance. In this context, the group of asylum seekers in Mayblin’s study who pool their meagre resources in order to buy food in bulk and cook as a group,⁴² RCOs that provide their members with tips to get the most out of solicitor’s meetings or who translate Home Office letters,⁴³ the residents of Glasgow who house homeless asylum seekers, NGOs providing free legal advice, and volunteers who visit detainees imprisoned in isolated detention centres are all, in small ways, acting in defiance of the spirit of the hostile environment and the Slow Violence it inflicts (even if they are not engaging in overt forms of protest, and even if they do not necessarily understand their own actions as acts of resistance). Resistance, in other words, does not only consist of overt acts of protest undertaken in public.

Proxy Resistance

As mentioned above, and as shown in our original research into acts of protest by refugees and asylum seekers, many NGOs across Scotland have played an important role in enabling asylum seekers to survive in the hostile environment – through providing food,

38. Ibid.

39. For more on these debates within the broad literature on resistance see J. A. Hollander and R. L. Einwohner, ‘Conceptualising Resistance,’ *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004): 533-54; Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson, “‘Everyday Resistance’: Exploration of a Concept and Its Theories,” *Resistance Studies Magazine*, no.1 (2013).

40. Vinthagen and Johansson, ‘Everyday Resistance’.

41. There may be contexts in which, unlike the context of the UK asylum system, the purpose of the social system is not to render a particular population uniquely vulnerable and so acts of survival should not necessarily be read as acts of everyday resistance. For example, engaging in theft in order to eat can be an act of survival but may not necessarily be an act of everyday resistance.

42. Mayblin et al., ‘Necropolitics’, 115.

43. Teresa Piacentini, ‘Everyday Acts of Resistance’, in *Immigrant Protest: Politics, Aesthetics, and Everyday Dissent*, ed. Imogen Tyler and Kim Marciniak (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 175.

clothes, childcare, language lessons, and legal advice free of charge. Without this additional support, many of the asylum seekers who do engage in more public, overt acts of resistance such as protest, would likely be unable to do so. But NGOs also play another role in these more direct forms of protest. Representatives and volunteers from NGOs often facilitate the organisation of demonstrations and act as spokespeople. Such acts resonate with what Baaz et al. call 'Proxy Resistance': resistance motivated by solidarity.⁴⁴ Those engaging in such resistance practices are not necessarily themselves the victims of a particular form of violence (although they can be), but nevertheless consider themselves to be allies of those who are and feel compelled to challenge the infliction of such violence, or the operation of particular configurations of power.

It would be easy to read acting as spokespeople during protests as a paternalistic gesture, in which well-meaning idealists speak *for* refugees and asylum seekers rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. We do not wish to dismiss such concerns, as action 'on behalf of' irregularised migrants does often take paternalistic forms. However, what we want to draw attention to here is the way in which taking on this 'public-facing' role arguably also provides a measure of protection – or strategic invisibility – during a very visible protest. As such, even within an act of overt political protest, there are those who may wish to remain invisible while still participating. Proxy resistance, even though it runs the risk of potentially provoking and strengthening the power that is being challenged,⁴⁵ nevertheless provides a safe space for those with precarious status to engage in more public acts of resistance while retaining their anonymity and highlights the diverse range of actors involved in resistance to the slow violence of asylum.

Interlinking/Shifting Forms of Resistance

We have seen that refugees and asylum seekers engage in more public, overt resistance practices, which individually can perhaps be understood as Acts of Citizenship or as examples of performative rights claiming. By beginning our examination of power relations and violence in the UK asylum system with such overt and public acts of resistance, and the concrete issues that ground these acts, we were able also to discern quieter, more subtle forms of resistance, which correspond in important ways to Scott's notion of 'Everyday Resistance'. The varied resistance practices of refugees and asylum seekers outlined above shows that, as Lilja et al. argue,⁴⁶ there are multi-layered interlinkages between different forms of resistance: more public forms of resistance can encourage or facilitate everyday resistance, and acts of everyday resistance can develop into or support acts of more public or organised resistance. There is, in other words, a two-way relationship between different forms of resistance.

44. M. Baaz et al., 'Defining and Analysing Resistance: Possible Entrances to the Study of Resistance Practices,' *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 41, no. 3 (2016): 142.

45. Mona Lilja, *Constructive Resistance: Repetitions, Emotions and Time* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 176.

46. Mona Lilja et al., 'How Resistance Encourages Resistance: Theorising the Nexus between Power, "Organised Resistance" and "Everyday Resistance"', *Journal of Political Power* 10, no. 1 (2017): 40.

Engaging in more overt forms of resistance under conditions of Slow Violence requires some degree of time, security, and resources, and many of these are 'secured' (often temporarily) by acts of everyday resistance. For example, the Unity Centre, an asylum seeker run charity in Glasgow, engages in a number of acts of resistance. They issue online direct action appeals in order to disrupt impending deportations of asylum seekers, they organise protests and blockades outside of the Glasgow branch of the Home Office, and they campaign against detention and destitution. In addition to these more overt acts of resistance, however, the Unity Centre also has connections with forms of welfare support that facilitate everyday resistance. In 2009, as an offshoot of Unity Centre, Unity in the Community was established as a charity which runs a number of shops which not only provide clothes, food, and household items for asylum seekers (and other poor residents of the area) at lower cost, but also established the Glasgow Night Shelter (now 'Safe in Scotland') which provides a safe place to sleep for destitute asylum seekers. There is, then, often a close connection between acts of everyday resistance (acts of survival in the hostile environment), and more public resistance practices such as Acts of Citizenship. Just as the asylum system itself is a complex configuration of power relations, so too does the 'ecosystem' of resistance to the violence inflicted by this system appear to be characterised by complex relationships and a variety of different actors.

Dispersed Resistance

As we discussed above, while an Acts of Citizenship/performative rights claiming framework is useful for understanding the (political) nature of individual acts of protest in which non-status migrants make claims for rights, it is perhaps less useful for analysing a variety of acts over a sustained period of time – such as the 20 years' worth of protests we gathered during our research. These acts do not appear to have coalesced into a sustained and coherent social movement over these 20 years, but nor are they the hidden, quiet and disguised acts characteristic of everyday resistance. In many ways, these public, but less organised/coordinated, resistance practices conform to Lilja and Vinthagen's notion of 'dispersed resistance': resistance practices between the poles of organised public resistance and hidden everyday resistance; resistance practices that may be 'extraordinary' and not 'everyday' in their expression, but that also are 'not necessarily coupled with communicative networks, collective identities or sustained collective actions as is often the case for social movements.'⁴⁷ 'Dispersed resistance' is, for Lilja and Vinthagen, an umbrella concept for resistance practices between the poles of organised public resistance such as social movements and hidden everyday resistance.

While 'dispersed resistance' highlights something important about more public practices of resistance that are not necessarily sustained or organised, and also highlights something important about small scale, individual resistance that is 'extraordinary' and public, rather than 'everyday' and hidden, the notion of 'dispersion' may unintentionally draw attention *away* from what else might unite or give coherence to such acts of resistance beyond communicative networks, collective identities and sustained organising. In

47. Lilja and Vinthagen, 'Dispersed Resistance', 215.

the remainder of the article, we offer a different umbrella concept – Slow Resistance – to capture not just forms of resistance that sit somewhere between the poles of organised and everyday resistance (as dispersed resistance does), but to also capture what *unites/gives coherence* to this dispersed resistance, what links different forms of resistance together, and which also captures the role of temporality in resistance in the face of the Slow Violence.

Slow Resistance

A Common Target Uniting Different Forms of Resistance

If we return to the public resistance practices engaged in by refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland with which we began our examination of resistance under conditions of Slow Violence, we can see that even though these resistance practices have yet to consolidate into a coherent and sustained social movement, there is something important which connects these otherwise seemingly disparate – or dispersed – acts of resistance: the particular form of *violence* to which they most often respond.

Taking a few specific examples from our research in turn, we can begin to see how the various protest actions, targeting different nodes on the asylum web, are all, in one way or another, *acts of resistance against Slow Violence*. In our first example, from 2005, faced with the threat of deportation, the asylum seeking spouse of a UK citizen attending a demonstration in Glasgow stated, ‘In my country no-one is allowed to talk because the government will kill you. . . Here, everyone is allowed to talk but the government just ignores you. The two are just the same. They just kill you in different ways’.⁴⁸ Here, resistance is being undertaken despite a sense of futility, but the sense of futility itself is telling. Frustration at being ignored when raising issues with the asylum process, with housing problems, and with being kept in detention, were common across the protests. Protesting detainees in detention, for example, often begged for a response from the Home Office, for some recognition of their existence and of their cases, rather than being consigned to oblivion in Dungavel.

Our next example is from 2010, and a vigil held for an asylum seeking family from Russia who had committed suicide by throwing themselves off the balcony of the high-rise block of flats to which they had been dispersed. A fellow asylum seeker stated: ‘We live in extreme poverty, yet we cannot work and every day we fear being sent back home.’⁴⁹ This stands out as a particularly stark example of the Slow Violence to which Mayblin’s study draws our attention: the slow psychological violence that permeates people’s daily lives by the restrictions placed on their ability to lead a normal life while waiting for status.⁵⁰ In our final example, three Iranian asylum seekers in Glasgow go on hunger strike to challenge the rejection of their asylum claims. In a statement made by

48. Michael Tierney, ‘Brides and Prejudice’, *The Herald (Glasgow)*, 8 October 2005.

49. Janice Burns, ‘The Red Road to Nowhere: Refugees Rally at High-Rise Hellhole’, *Sunday Mail*, 14 March 2010.

50. For a thought-provoking treatment of such dynamics beyond the UK, see Mountz, ‘Where Asylum Seekers Wait’, 381-99.

one of the hunger strikers at the start of the protest, he explains why they decided to undertake such an extreme form of protest: 'We didn't take this action lightly. We are all in great pain. But we will continue doing this until we get justice.'⁵¹ What we can see here is the pain to which the hunger strike *responds*. While a hunger strike is a particularly visceral form of protest in which the protestor inflicts pain on him/herself, the hunger strikers here are doing so in response to the pain inflicted on them by the asylum system, and the importance of exposing this violence is paramount to the protestor.

What is thrown into relief by these examples is that while these different forms of protest all target different nodes on the asylum web, they are all also acts of resistance to a *consistent form of violence* inflicted across that web. There is, then, an important connection between these forms of protest that is captured by the concept of Slow Resistance: resistance to, and under conditions of, Slow Violence.

We can see the centrality of Slow Violence in other resistance practices undertaken by refugees and asylum seekers highlighted above. The everyday resistance engaged in by those seeking to survive in and navigate through the hostile environment are also responses to the Slow Violence inflicted by the asylum system, as are some kinds of proxy resistance undertaken by NGOs. As discussed earlier, the hostile environment disperses asylum seekers to deprived areas and gives them only enough support to prevent absolute destitution. Asylum seekers suffer shame, stress, anxiety, humiliation, fear, isolation, weight loss, hunger, poverty, and a range of severe mental and physical health problems. The ever-shifting legal terrain and ever-present possibility of detention are also a constant source of stress and anxiety which makes everyday life difficult to cope with. Pooling their meagre resources, sharing legal tips, citizens housing homeless asylum seekers, NGOs providing free legal advice, and volunteers who visit detainees imprisoned in isolated detention centres are all engaged in resistance practices (whether conscious or not) in which the target is the Slow Violence inflicted on those trapped within the asylum system.

Slow Resistance is a useful umbrella concept, then, for understanding different forms of resistance to a *common form of violence*, and the connections between them. It can involve public resistance practices such as protest (Acts of Citizenship/performative rights claiming), acts of everyday resistance, and acts of 'dispersed' resistance, all of which are drawn together through their reaction to/orientation against a particular form of violence inflicted by a particular configuration of power relations: Slow Violence.

Centring Temporalities of Resistance and Change

The notion of Slow Violence was coined by Rob Nixon explicitly to draw attention to the temporal aspect of violence; to how structural forms of violence can build up over many years; to how the harms inflicted may occur at a significant delay from an original cause. Slow Resistance similarly centres the temporality/temporalities of resistance to Slow Violence: if time is key to understanding the forms of violence that asylum seekers are

51. William Tinning and Raymond Duncan, 'Kurds in Glasgow Sew Up Lips in Protest at Plea for Asylum', *The Herald (Glasgow)*, 23 February 2004.

subject to, then time also functions in a number of ways in resistance to that violence: time can be a mechanism of oppression, but it can also be contested and strategically deployed by the oppressed.⁵² In other words, to build on Lilja's observation that a focus on time when exploring the relationship between power and resistance 'uncovers new patterns and indicates paths of political struggles and social change',⁵³ we can perhaps also see such patterns and paths by exploring the relationship of *violence* and resistance. To be clear, Slow Resistance does not mean that all practices of resistance against Slow Violence themselves happen at a 'slow' pace. As we show below, some Slow Resistance practices – such as hunger striking – aim to simultaneously accelerate as well as decelerate time. Nevertheless, under conditions of Slow Violence, even less 'slow' practices of resistance will most likely not lead to quick changes, but to what Roland Bleiker refers to as a 'slow transformation of values.'⁵⁴ The 'slow' of Slow Resistance is intended, then, to draw attention not just to a particular form of violence – Slow Violence – but to the multiple roles/uses of time involved in resistance to that violence, *and* to the temporal scales of change.

Slow Violence proves so persistent and difficult to challenge in part, Nixon argues, because 'delayed effects structure our most consequential forgettings.'⁵⁵ Protests, such as those outlined in this article, can be seen as 'events', which act as moments of rupture in the Slow Violence of asylum – events which (seek to) compel our *attention*. Rather than a quiet 'endurance' of Slow Violence, demonstrations, occupations, protest marches, hunger strikes, and others are creative moments which seek to 'shake up official disregard and recalibrate praxes of not-noticing – both embedded in slow violence – to attune, instead, to an accrual of wrong-doings.'⁵⁶ Such events, in addition to being ruptures in the time that structures asylum seeking so as to draw attention to its violence, also engage time in interesting ways. The paradigmatic example of this is the hunger strike – such as that undertaken by the three Iranian asylum seekers highlighted above, who set up a makeshift camp across from the Home Office building in Glasgow in which to undertake their protest. A hunger strike such as this is an event that crystallises in the time of the protest the slow accretion of harm by making it visible through the continual and public refusal of food. Simultaneously, the hunger strike is a form of protest that is slow and drawn-out. A hunger strike is, however, also a claim to speed as moral.⁵⁷ The immediate and potential consequences of a hunger strike for the hunger striker elicit the imperative of a swift response – with the hope that this response will be an ethical one – before the hunger striker does permanent damage to their health or, at worst, dies from their protest: a deferred or incremental response to a hunger strike simply won't do.

Acts of Everyday Resistance also engage time, although in a different way to overt acts of protest. 'Incrementality', rather than creative rupture, characterises the survival-as-resistance in which asylum seekers are often engaged. Incrementality is, Ahmann

52. Chloe Ahmann, 'It's Exhausting to Create an Event out of Nothing': Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time', *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2018): 142-71.

53. Lilja, 'The Politics of Time and Temporality,' 420.

54. Bleiker, *Popular Dissent*, 272.

55. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 8.

56. Ahmann, 'Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time', 161.

57. *Ibid.*, 160.

argues, a style of response that ‘mirrors the rhythm of slow violence’.⁵⁸ Remaining largely beneath the thresholds of (official) recognition, the crafting of community organisations, the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and the myriad other strategies that asylum seekers engage in to navigate, and support others to navigate, the hostile environment, gradually, slowly – incrementally – has the potential to build something lasting: a sense of belonging and ‘in-placeness’⁵⁹ in a system predicated on dislocation, dispersion and isolation.

Similarly, the piecemeal, or node-specific, campaigns focused on particular aspects of the hostile environment can also be understood as incremental responses that employ time creatively. The lack of a multi-frontal, coordinated attack on the hostile environment as a whole was highlighted above as a consequence, or symptom, of the Slow Violence suffered by asylum seekers which makes it very difficult to engage in coordinated action against all the aspects of the hostile environment simultaneously. But, this can also act as a *possibility* for a different approach to resistance. Incrementality as strategy, Ahmann explains, can mean ‘making progress toward controversial ends while no one is watching.’⁶⁰ While it is not necessarily the case that ‘no one’ is watching attempts to overturn the ban on the right to work, for example, taking a slower, more incremental approach to resisting the hostile environment, could stand a better chance of success than an attempt to overhaul the entire asylum system in one go. Slowness and incrementality are, thus, deployed *strategically* in resistance to the Slow Violence of asylum, and enable what Bleiker refers to as the ‘slow transformation of values’ through which more systemic change perhaps becomes possible and stands a greater chance of lasting success.

Conclusion

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* Foucault states that ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’⁶¹ If Foucault was right and resistance is a reaction to power, then the ‘peculiarities of power decide how resistance can be conducted.’⁶² The UK asylum system is a complex web of laws, regulations, actors and processes/practices which are supported by interlocking forms of power: sovereign-, disciplinary-, bio- and necro-power. We have shown that while these forms of power may often be very difficult to disentangle ‘on the ground’, we certainly can identify a particular type of *violence* to which these diverse resistance practices respond. This form of violence – Slow Violence – is attritional, occurs gradually and out of sight, is dispersed across time and space, and is the effect on asylum seekers of the complex configuration of power relations that

58. Ibid., 154.

59. Piacentini, ‘Everyday Resistance’, 170.

60. Ahmann, ‘Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time’, 155.

61. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95.

62. Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen, ‘Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power and Biopower: Resisting What Power with What Resistance?’ *Journal of Political Power* 7, no. 1 (2014): 107.

underpin the UK asylum system. It is a form of violence that seeks to render subjects docile and compliant, and is a difficult form of violence to resist precisely because of its debilitating effects. And yet, resistance does occur, and occurs in a variety of ways.

Seeking a more useful framework with which to understand resistance to this Slow Violence, we have departed from the more common approaches of Acts of Citizenship and Arendtian action in public, with their almost exclusive focus on action undertaken in public, and have called resistance to this particular form of violence ‘Slow Resistance’. Slow Resistance, we have shown, can involve public resistance practices such as protest, acts of everyday resistance, and acts of ‘dispersed’ resistance, all of which are drawn together through their reaction to/orientation against Slow Violence. Moreover, just as Slow Violence is intended to draw our attention to the temporal aspect of violence, so too does Slow Resistance attune us to the multiple temporalities of resistance practices *and their effects*. Under conditions of Slow Violence, practices of resistance will most likely not lead to quick changes, but to Bleiker’s ‘slow transformation of values.’

This slow transformation of values is perhaps what enables more systemic changes to occur. In the two years since August 2019, when our data collection ended, we have begun to see what may be evidence of this Slow Resistance leading to just such a slow transformation of values, and the beginnings of what could be a more organised and coordinated resistance movement targeting the entire web of hostile environment policies. The Asylum Reform Initiative, established in 2019 as a coalition of six large refugee-oriented organisations, but now including 200 organisations and businesses across the UK, is spearheading a campaign – Together with Refugees – for systemic change in the UK asylum system.⁶³ Recognising that efforts to enforce and promote the rights and well-being of asylum seekers have been fragmented and reactive,⁶⁴ in part because of the very nature of the hostile environment and the Slow Violence it inflicts, the organisations involved believe that the time is ripe for fighting collectively for a completely new approach to asylum in the UK. The UK government may itself have provided the very opening needed. In March 2021, the UK government announced its plans for perhaps the most significant overhaul of the UK asylum system since the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, with which this article began.⁶⁵ The policy proposals have received widespread condemnation from refugees and asylum seekers, from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and from civil society organisations, and, if passed, would make it almost impossible for anyone to seek asylum in the UK.

But the slow transformation of values which Slow Resistance might bring about is not only evident in the actions of NGOs. On May 13th, 2021, in Glasgow, hundreds of people burst onto the streets of Kenmure and, for 8 hours, disrupted – and prevented – the detention of two of their Indian asylum seeker neighbours. As Alison Phipps highlighted in

63. Available at: <https://togetherwithrefugees.org.uk/members>. Last accessed December 7, 2020.

64. Available at: https://cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/campaign-coalition-presentation-sector-meeting_April.pdf. Last accessed December 7, 2020.

65. UK Home Office, *New Plan for Immigration: Policy Statement*, 24 March 2021. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972517/CCS207_CCS0820091708-001_Sovereign_Borders_Web_Accessible.pdf. Last accessed December 7, 2020.

The National the next day, the crowds that were seen in Glasgow were ‘made and sustained by the on-going everyday actions of care, built up over years of many strong small organisations that mean everyone who’s “fae somewhere” [from somewhere] – as Refuweege put it – can know someone.’⁶⁶ These diverse actions undertaken over the 20 years since the beginnings of the dispersal policy which was designed to isolate asylum seekers are what we have called Slow Resistance. By giving it a name, and by showing how what might at first appear to be disparate forms and practices of protests are in fact connected by a particular form of violence, we can perhaps begin to meet the representational challenge posed by a form of violence that often goes unnoticed. We have not been able here, for reasons of space, to offer a roadmap for how this concept of Slow Resistance may prove useful to those examining Slow Violence beyond the context of asylum politics. We do, however, hope that the evidence of diverse resistance practices under conditions of Slow Violence that we have analysed here, and the connections between them that we have attempted to trace, can provide inspiration for further development of this concept moving forward.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

66. Alison Phipps, ‘How Extraordinary Community Action Led to Kenmure Street Victory Over Cruelty,’ *The National*, 14 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19303832.alison-hipps-extraordinary-community-action-led-kenmure-street-victory>. Last accessed December 7, 2020.