

Embodying Resistance: Politics and the Mobilization of Vulnerability

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs**Moya Lloyd** 

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Abstract

How are we to understand hunger strikes and episodes of lip-sewing in immigration detention? Are they simply cases of self-destruction or bare life, as is often claimed, or is there scope to view these embodied acts of self-harm as having a political dimension and to see those engaged in them as resistant subjects exercising political agency? To explore these issues, I draw on recent feminist theoretical work on vulnerability. Received wisdom suggests that vulnerability is an impediment to political action. Rejecting the idea that vulnerability equates exclusively to injurability and passivity, I contend, by contrast, that corporeal vulnerability can potentially prompt action, serve as a resource for collective acts of resistance, and enable the politicization of certain spaces. Since context matters to how vulnerability and resistance intersect, I illustrate my argument by exploring, in particular, the protests that took place at Woomera immigration detention centre in Australia in 2002.

Keywords

body, immigration detention, resistance, vulnerability, Woomera

On 26 January 2002, a detainee, known as WMA 365, lips sewn shut, climbed to the top of the perimeter fence at the now-closed Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC) in South Australia and launched himself on to the coiled wire below, shredding his body in the process. The feat ‘nearly cost him his life’ (Mann, 2003: 55). The man, an Afghan Hazara called Mazhar Ali,¹ needed over 100 stitches to his face, arms, legs, neck, and stomach, and narrowly missed severing his jugular vein (O’Neill, 2008: 94). At the time he jumped, Ali was already in a physically weakened state. Held in indefinite mandatory detention, like all asylum seekers in Australia at this time, he had

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been on hunger strike for more than two weeks.² Caught on camera, his dive onto the perimeter fence was reported in newspapers in Australia and across the globe where, Williams and Hughes (2015) note, he was characterized as ‘some anonymous mad extremist attempting suicide on television’ (p. 46).

Ali was not the first or the last to undertake such actions. Across Indonesia during November and December 2021, several Afghan Hazara refugees sewed their lips shut (Tamer, 2021), and 12 asylum seekers in Mexico did likewise in February 2022, while they and others also went on hunger strike (Narea, 2022). In May and June 2022, Syrian, Egyptian and Sudanese asylum seekers at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre in the UK undertook a five-day hunger strike (Taylor and Weaver, 2022). While acknowledging that the ‘situated conditions’ (Page, 2018: 282; see also Gilson, 2021) of each event differ – and I will return to this later – the question I want to pose is whether we need to understand actions of this kind *exclusively* as those of distressed individuals engaging in self-harm or whether there is also scope to view them as political and to see those engaged in them as resistant subjects exercising political agency. I am particularly interested in whether politics is possible in situations of severe precarity like the detention camp.

To make my argument I draw on recent feminist theorizations of vulnerability. Received wisdom suggests that vulnerability is an impediment to political action. My argument, building on this work, is that resistance and corporeal vulnerability are, in fact, complexly intertwined such that corporeal vulnerability can serve variously as the prompt to political action, be drawn on as a resource in collective acts of resistance and, because of the body’s dependency on what is external to it, be able, on occasion at least, to politicize particular spaces.

There are four stages to my argument. First, I consider three frames used to understand actions such as Ali’s. I call them the self-destruction, site, and bare life frames. I am concerned, particularly, with the implications for agency of these framings, as well as how they understand the body in relation to politics. This is followed in part two by a brief consideration of the conception of vulnerability (as injurability) operative in asylum processes, which treats it as both a negative condition requiring intervention and a limitation on agency. Part three turns to a range of feminist writings focused on corporeal vulnerability’s dualistic nature as both constraint and possibility and the implications of this for politics and resistance. In the final section of the paper, I return to my opening example. Drawing on the idea of vulnerability in/as resistance, I reframe Ali’s story to demonstrate that his embodied actions and those of his fellow detainees were resistant actions that, amongst other things, constituted Woomera as a politicized space.

Three Frames

Attempted suicide and self-harm are rife amongst refugees and asylum seekers, particularly those held in indefinite or prolonged detention (Silove et al., 2007; Van de Wiel et al., 2021). Reports by statutory bodies, international NGOs, and UN committees indicate that protracted confinement ‘in remote and hostile environments’, with limited access to adequate mental health care, is ‘directly related to the high prevalence of mental disorders found amongst detained asylum-seekers’ (Newman et al.,

2008: 115). 'Psychological distress', Silove et al. (2001) note in *The Lancet*, manifests itself 'in suicide attempts, acts of mass violence, group breakouts, rioting, burning of facilities, and sporadic hunger strikes' (p. 1437). It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find that deeds such as Ali's have been framed not as political but as acts of *self*-destruction resulting from psychiatric despair and escalating desperation (see Bailey, 2009).

The second frame deployed I call the *site* frame. Here significance is given less to the actions undertaken than to their locus. For instance, Ali's suspension on the razor wire is construed as emblematic of his status as an asylum seeker, 'poised on the boundary between the spaces of the citizen and non-citizen', in an 'interstitial position' (Farrier, 2011: 2), 'not really in Australia' but in 'the empty, ungoverned space of their bodies, confined within not-Australia' (Cohen cited in Perera, 2002). Refugee camps and detention centres are, as Perera (2002) notes, sites 'where people are not to be seen' – camps in Agamben's (1998) sense of that term where the 'state of exception' is materialized. They symbolize a space of 'scandalous inbetweenness' (Farrier, 2011: 8), neither within nor outside the polity, a 'suspended space', legally under its jurisdiction but exempted from it (Turner, 2005). Attention rarely focuses on the possibility that such sites – the camp and its fences – might be politicized through internee actions (Hyndman and Giles, 2017: 74).

The final frame is that of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998): 'damaged life, stripped of its political significance' (Ziarek, 2012: 195). I will not rehearse the discussion here but, as is well known, for Agamben (1998) the refugee, as the 'new living dead man' (p. 131), epitomizes bare life. The refugee's life is, thus, a politically unrecognized life, a life that might be disposed of with impunity. It stands in direct contrast to politically qualified life. The crucial feature of this binary for my purposes is that bare life is understood as evacuating the possibility of or capacity for resistance (see Bailey, 2009; Nyers, 2006). To take just one example: as Farrier (2011) notes, writing about Ali, 'his semi-nakedness [atop the wire] expresses the asylum seeker's biopolitical reality, constituted by the nation state as merely bare life, *without any kind of political agency*', incarnating the '*political and ethical absence* to which each asylum seeker is relegated' (p. 7, emphasis added). This is because, for Agamben, the body cannot be mobilized for oppositional purposes. There is, as he puts it, 'nothing in' it 'to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power' (Agamben, 1998: 187; Ziarek, 2012). Recourse to the body suggests rather the *impossibility* of politics. So, somatic exploits like lip-sewing or hunger strikes can only be understood as demonstrations of bare life and not as resistive or political.

Each of the three frames identified offers a distinctive interpretation of the acts alluded to at the start of the paper, and important insights into their potential meanings. But none of them explicitly explores whether acts of alleged psychological desperation, like hunger strikes and lip-sewing, conducted in suspended spaces, by lives stripped of legal and social status, might *also* be resistive, political actions. This is what this paper seeks to do.³ While some of Agamben's interlocutors have sought to politicize the concept of bare life (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Nyers, 2006; Ziarek, 2012), I want to take a different tack and focus on corporeal vulnerability. Such a reframing, I hope, will focus attention on the potential politics of these actions.

Vulnerability as Injurability

In line with its Latin etymological origins, where it derives from *vulnus*, ‘wound’, vulnerability is usually understood as the capacity to be harmed by external forces (Fineman, 2016; Schroeder and Gefenas, 2009) or to be injurable, where ‘injurability’ is an effect of embodiment (Butler, 2004, 2009). Although vulnerability is a potential feature of *all* human existence, as Margrit Shildrick noted in 2002, it is more commonly characterized as a ‘negative attribute’ (p. 1), ‘shortcoming’ (p. 71) or ‘falling short’ (p. 76) to which the ‘weak or unfortunate’ ‘succumb’ (p. 71). Vulnerability is thus a condition that needs mitigating against, either by attempting to minimize or eliminate risk or harm, or by extending safeguards to those considered unable to protect themselves and who require others to provide the necessary care and assistance (Gilson, 2014, 2021).

At first glance, such an interpretation might appear analytically apt for apprehending the plight of many refugees and asylum seekers. Fleeing their own countries to escape persecution, violence or war, their journeys to ‘safety’ often further imperil their lives, attesting to their situational injurability. Jurisprudentially, this conception of vulnerability as exposure to harm, in practice, underpins state and other organizations’ decisions about refugee resettlement (Mouzourakis et al., 2017: 10), detention (UNHCR and IDC, 2016: 1), asylum, access to services, and whether refugees ‘may be considered to have special reception needs and thus benefit from [. . .] specific support’ (European Union, 2013). In fact, in 2016 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Detention Coalition (IDC) launched a ‘vulnerability screening tool’ precisely to assist governments and other migration and asylum systems in identifying those at risk of harm who would thereby qualify for ‘special care, support, and protection’ (UNHCR and IDC, 2016: 1).

While more could and should be said about the institutionalization of vulnerability as a legal category and how it impacts positively and negatively on those seeking asylum, what interests me here is how the term is conceptualized. Understanding vulnerability as injurability captures *aspects* of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, but when that is *all* it is taken to entail it has some limitations politically and conceptually. As others have noted, it risks stereotyping particular groups or persons as vulnerable per se, regardless of any clearly identifiable structural or situational threat to them, such that their identity becomes defined by their purported vulnerability.⁴ Treating vulnerability as a ‘negative state’ (Gilson, 2011: 312, 2014, 2016a) leads to the positive – and problematic – valorisation of invulnerability (Gilson, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2018; Shildrick, 2002). Additionally, vulnerability-as-injurability assumes an ‘asymmetrical model’ (Shildrick, 2002: 77), prevalent in, for example, ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin, 2012: 3–4), where others (usually the more powerful, often the state) are considered morally, ethically, or politically responsible for protecting ‘the vulnerable’.

For the purposes of this paper, however, the most important limitation presented by this conceptualization of vulnerability-as-injurability is its association with ‘powerlessness, loss of control, or loss of agency’ (Mackenzie et al., 2014a: 9), which denies the capacity for resistance of the ‘vulnerable’ and, consequently in my view, oversimplifies the complex relation that exists between vulnerability and resistance. Instead of rejecting the language of vulnerability *tout court*, because it seemingly connotes passivity and an

absence of agency, in the next two sections I explore an alternative understanding of vulnerability that provides a way to think through how it might be possible to challenge conditions of vulnerabilization through embodied actions.

Ambivalent Vulnerability

Critical feminist literature on vulnerability has centred on a range of diverse issues, too vast to cover here. It is the exploration of vulnerability's 'ambiguous potential' (Murphy, 2012: 65) by writers such as Butler (2015, 2016), Cavarero (2009), Gilson (2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2021), and Ziarek (2013) that I want to focus on. Each of these feminist discussions starts from the position that ontological vulnerability is an inescapable feature of embodied existence universally shared but that lived experiences of corporeal vulnerability are socially produced and differentially distributed (see Gilson, 2018). For Gilson (2014), they are the 'specific forms that vulnerability takes in the social world' (p. 37), brought about by policies, governmental actions, discourses, wars, famines and more. As Cavarero (2009) puts it, there is nothing 'necessary about the *vulnerus* (wound) embedded in the term "vulnerable"' (p. 30).⁵ Specific historical conditions give rise to distinct and sometimes entrenched experiences of vulnerability for determinate fleshy populations.

What distinguishes these feminist approaches, despite theoretical differences between them, is, firstly, that vulnerability is not treated as a disposition or attribute of individual bodies but, borrowing from Jenkins (2015), as a 'modality of being' (p. 128) arising from and conditioned by human interdependency. Secondly, vulnerability is perceived to have a dual valence. In Gilson's (2011) words, '[v]ulnerability' is not simply 'a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us' (p. 310, original emphasis), because, as a condition of intersubjectivity (Gilson, 2015, 2021), vulnerability is an openness to 'being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control' (Gilson, 2014: 2). Similarly for Butler (2004), it is a mode of impressionability (p. 46): an exposure to what is outside or beyond us. Not just to violence and exploitation but also to what facilitates corporeal life and action. As such it is not reducible to injurability (Butler, 2009: 34, 61). Rather, as Gilson (2021) observes, it is 'a condition of possibility, a plastic potentiality' (p. 92) that is also tied to agency.

Consideration of the 'ambiguous potential' of vulnerability has opened up important questions, especially about the moral obligations and ethical responsibilities vulnerability occasions (see, in particular, Gilson, 2014, 2016a, 2018, 2021, but also Butler 2004, 2009, 2015; Lloyd, 2015; Mackenzie et al., 2014b; Ziarek, 2013). What is under-explored in this literature, however, and what interests me, is the relation between *politics* and vulnerability. Where it is examined, discussion usually focuses on one of two concerns. First, how the language of vulnerability is mobilized in political discourse and by whom (Gilson, 2021; Koivunen et al., 2018; Oliviero, 2018). Second, how inter-relational corporeal vulnerability elicits or enables a political *response from another*, typically institutions such as the 'responsive state' (Fineman, 2010: 274; see also Vaittinen, 2015), where the emphasis is on what can be done to reduce, eliminate, or mitigate the vulnerability of the other, an approach that risks construing politics too narrowly and effacing the possibility of subaltern agency and resistance.

I want to pursue a different line of inquiry, which explores how those with little or no social, political, or legal standing might nevertheless *themselves* be able to engage in political struggle to contest the terms of their *own* lived (situational, contextual, or structural) vulnerability. As such, my interest in this paper is not in the kinds of political actions taken *on behalf* of ‘the vulnerable’. Rather I seek to evaluate the role of vulnerability *in* subaltern (acts of) politics.

Resistance and vulnerability are typically thought to be mutually exclusive, with vulnerability equating to a lack of agency and the ability to resist, indicating one is not vulnerable. As noted above, corollaries of this position include assuming agency is a capacity that requires restoring to ‘the vulnerable’; that they possess little power to make changes to their own lives; and that others are required to protect them. According to this logic, one is either vulnerable or resistant, not both. But what if vulnerability can be ‘marshaled or mobilized for the purposes of resistance’ (Butler, 2016: 26), forming not just ‘part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment’ (Butler, 2016: 22) but also one of its conditions of possibility (Butler et al., 2016: 1; Page, 2018)? If vulnerability ‘enters into agency’ (Butler, 2016: 25) and can be thought of, as Gilson (2016b) proposes, as ‘the bodily basis for expressive agency’ (p. 55), this implies that (vulnerable) subjects are not just ‘exposed’ or ‘acted on’ (Butler, 2016: 24) but can also act. That vulnerability, to borrow from Ziarek (2013), is also a ‘condition of intersubjective freedom, action, and political engagement’ (p. 68).⁶

One consequence of interlinking vulnerability and resistance thus is that agency cannot be understood as the faculty of a self-possessive, independent, rational individual able to author their own actions. Rather, agency, like vulnerability, is conditioned by dependency – on others, on social norms, and on the external world, including organizations, institutions, and infrastructure – and arises out of relationality. Instead of being mutually exclusive, this suggests a complex, multifaceted, and ambiguous relationship between the two,⁷ where vulnerability can be *both* a consequence of resistance *and* one of its prior conditions, and resistance can be *both* a reaction to vulnerability *as well as* made possible by it.

Hitherto, feminist discussions of vulnerability as a force mobilized in resistance have tended, as Butler’s work exemplifies, to centre on prominent examples of political protest: the Arab Spring, the demonstrations in Turkey’s Taksim Gezi Park, the Occupy Movement (Butler, 2015), or Black Lives Matter (Gilson, 2016b). First, these are all large-scale events involving the mass mobilization of bodies in *public*. Second, they relate to already recognizable modes of non-violent political action: demonstrations, marches, occupations, and ‘die-ins’. Third, although socially, politically, and/or economically vulnerable participants took part, and although, as Gilson (2016b) notes, the protests opened participants to the potential risk of incarceration and/or violence at the hands of another (the police, for instance), the *form* (Bargu, 2022) of the actions involved does not directly manifest vulnerability (Rozmarin, 2020). Fourth, these examples are rarely examined in detail.⁸

The acts that interest me are of another order. They are not conventionally viewed as unambiguously, straightforwardly, or universally political. They involve acts of self-harm or violence against the body, undertaken by smaller groups on their own behalf. They take place in (immigration) detention, not in public. Although they mobilize bodies in concert, what distinguishes them from more traditional forms of protest is that, in

resisting, those bodies are transformed ‘in violent ways’ (Bargu, 2022: 299), thereby exposing the interrelation between corporeal vulnerability and resistance. Finally, their meanings are conditioned by context.

Although the hunger strikes and lip-sewing undertaken at Woomera employ the same modalities of self-inflicted harm as the other cases of refugee protest mentioned earlier, each arises within distinct social, political and historical conditions and takes place at different sites. Together, this shapes their meaning and impact. Both the Afghan Hazaras in Indonesia and the 12 asylum seekers in Mexico who sutured their lips did so in public. The Hazaras were amongst thousands of refugees who set up camps and held ‘tent-strikes’ (Llewellyn, 2021) outside UNHCR offices and migration agencies in Jakarta, protesting lengthy resettlement times, up to ten years in some cases (Tamer, 2021). In Mexico, lip-sewing and hunger strikes were part of wider demonstrations outside the offices of the National Immigration Institute (INM) office in Tapachula over asylum processing times (Narea, 2022). The hunger strikes at Brook House, like those at Woomera, occurred in detention, but were prompted by the UK government’s plan to deport the detainees to Rwanda (Taylor and Weaver, 2022).

Further, all of these cases differ in important ways from acts of hunger striking deployed by those already recognizable as ‘political prisoners’ (Bargu, 2014) or by members of protest movements (the suffragettes, Irish Republicanism, the anti-apartheid struggles; Shah, 2022), just in the same way that lip-sewing undertaken by refugees in detention signifies differently from lip-sewing protests undertaken publicly by Bolivian sex workers (Reuters, 2007), Indonesian gig drivers (Timmerman, 2022), or by artists such as Petr Pavlensky.⁹

This is because vulnerability is what Page (2018) calls a ‘located concept’ (p. 282), experienced by specific bodies in particular ways at precise times and places. This conditions the corporeal resources people can mobilize in any given setting and the types of actions they can engage in, as well as shaping the meanings and effects of those actions. Although embodied vulnerability may be a resource drawn on in resistance, be ‘productive (rather than being positive or negative)’ (Page, 2018: 282), as both Gilson and Ziarek have proposed, and make possible forms of agency,¹⁰ there is, as Page (2018) suggests, no universal or standardized response to vulnerability across different bodies, contexts, or conditions. To understand how *particular* vulnerabilities shape, delimit, and are galvanised in acts of resistance, therefore, we need to explore specific cases. While, often, little is known publicly about the particularities of specific instances of refugee hunger strikes or lip sewing, this is not the case with Woomera, where a range of insightful material exists to inform analysis.¹¹

One final caveat. In proposing that confined or sequestered bodies can act politically I am expressly rejecting three ideas. The first is that politics is restricted to a particular sphere of activity that can be demarcated from other pre-, a- or extra-political realms, such as the social or the private (Arendt, 1958). The second is that certain categories of person *ipso facto* lack agency and/or are outside of politics, such as those associated with ‘bare life’ or those, to recall an earlier point, categorized as vulnerable. The third is that the body is a limit to political action, which is more properly conceived of as grounded in speech or language (Arendt, 1958; Rancière, 1999). Instead, I contend that the embodied actions collectively undertaken by vulnerable detainees in detention are resistant acts that turned the Woomera detention camp into a political space.

Vulnerability and Resistance: Reframing 'The Man Who Jumped'¹²

Ali's individual deeds stand out because of the publicity surrounding his leap onto the razor wire encircling Woomera. But he was not alone in protesting.¹³ Quite the reverse, in fact. Department of Immigration figures indicate that over 250 asylum seekers went on hunger strike for 16 days that January. Those in detention say more than 370 were involved. About 70 detainees (men, women, and children) sutured their lips (O'Neill, 2008: 89; Fiske, 2016: 116).¹⁴ Performatively, the hunger strikes and lip-sewing episodes in Woomera in 2002 were collective endeavours involving the multiple vulnerable internees who found themselves randomly thrown together in detention. Initially the protests centred on the government freeze on processing Afghan asylum applications, instituted abruptly at the end of 2001 after the fall of the Taliban, and its allied threat of deportation.¹⁵ Ultimately, however, the dispute extended to conditions at Woomera, including: overcrowding, delays in receiving medical attention, no access to newspapers, telephones, or contact with others outside the camp during separation detention, little to no air conditioning in searing heat during the summer, limited washing and toilet facilities, problems of under-staffing, and exclusion from legal aid (Fiske, 2016; Jupp, 2007: 189; Mann, 2003; Nyers, 2006: 120; O'Neill, 2008: 89).

The discourse of 'bare life', the third frame identified earlier, locates corporeal vulnerability outside of politics. From such a perspective, as Bailey (2009) suggests, actions in detention conducted by way of the body, like lip-sewing or hunger strikes, are considered to have no political value or relevance. They incarnate bare life, 'a life where power relations are absent' (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005: 9). However, the body always materializes in a field of power relations. The concrete vulnerabilities Ali and his fellow detainees experienced, both as Hazaras and refugees, were the effects of a confluence of very particular geo-political, ethno-political, politico-legal and material factors, from the post 9/11 war on terror and fall of Kabul, through Taliban discrimination against and marginalization of the Hazara, and the Howard government's suspension of asylum claims, to the practices operative at Woomera. Like other refugees in different contexts, they were *made* structurally and situationally vulnerable and their lives *actively* rendered precarious by specific policies, normative frameworks, government and intergovernmental actions (and inactions). But, to recall Foucault (1978), the (vulnerable) body, though constituted by power, is also a locus of/for resistance (p. 95).

How might the idea of vulnerability as a resource for resistance help us to understand practices such as hunger strikes and lip-sewing? Both very obviously mobilize the body's literal vulnerability to harm and injury. Refusing nourishment for sustained periods produces cramps, reduces muscle function, damages the immune system, potentially impairs the vital organs and, continued long enough, invokes death (Fiske, 2016), thereby exposing the fragility and mortality of the flesh. Threading lips shut requires labial tissue to be pierced by a sharp object, causing bleeding and scabbing. At Woomera, such insubordinate behaviours also exposed the bodies of the detainees to potential punishment and further risk including, for instance, handcuffing, the threat of incarceration in the punishment block for breaking the rules, and the use of water cannon against them (Mann, 2003; Moorhead, 2006; Nyers, 2006: 120; O'Neill, 2008: 25).

But these actions in this setting, it seems to me, do more than this. They also testify to the performative relation between somatic vulnerability and agency. Instead of reading hunger strikes and lip-sewing as evidence of the apolitical bare life of the refugee, I am suggesting we read them as examples of concrete resistance *enfleshed*. As others have pointed out (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Pugliese, 2002), when refugee voices are unheard – when, for instance, their stories of persecution are not believed, basic requests for information are ignored, or governments deny them access to the media or civil society, as at Woomera – suturing lips communicates, through physical enactment, what it simultaneously repudiates and exposes: the silencing and inaudibility of the detainees.¹⁶ Detention denies their words’ meaning, so internees protest performatively, ‘in and by way of a violently embodied silence’ (Bargu, 2022: 294). Withdrawal of speech is materialized on and through vulnerable bodies by sewing lips together, an action that reproduces the voicelessness imposed on internees by state authorities just as it resists it. Similarly, in the face of a regime that aims to keep detainees alive but in indefinite detention, the refusal of food functions as a performative embodied refusal to ‘live indefinitely in such conditions’ (Wilcox, 2015: 65).¹⁷ Corporeal life is put at risk, is ‘weaponized’ to borrow Bargu’s (2014) provocative term, to demonstrate and resist the devaluation of the incarcerated lives of Woomera’s internees. The hunger-strikers take control of their food consumption to reveal the lack of control over their bodies vulnerabilized through detention.

As Fiske (2016) notes of Woomera, where ‘speech without physical action’ had failed, ‘people in detention began to use their bodies to make their voices heard’ (p. 123). Flesh was imperilled to oppose vulnerabilization, institutionalized power and dehumanization. (Recall, for instance, that at this time camp detainees throughout Australia, including those at Woomera, were denied their names.)¹⁸ Bodies were intentionally exposed to power, to paraphrase Butler (2016: 22), to counter political invisibility and to advance political demands: for the processing of claims, rights to speak and be heard, better conditions, family reunification. To regard these non-linguistic bodily actions *only* as self-destructive (frame one) or expressing ‘bare life’ (frame three) overlooks the ways in which they were also collective acts of resistance mobilized through corporeal *vulnerability*, undertaken to intervene not just in life in detention but also in the wider politico-legal system. The internees, as Fiske (2016) observes, used ‘their bodies to reinsert themselves into the polis’ (p. 123).

The vulnerabilities of detention and displacement at Woomera not only acted as a prompt to action; these resistive mobilizations, I will suggest, helped constitute the camp as a political space. Persons held in mandatory detention are physically and legally excluded from public space, which is conventionally regarded as the space of politics (Perera, 2002). For some (frame two), physical exclusion signals political exclusion. Because they cannot enter the formally constituted political realm, it is assumed that they are unable to engage in collective political action. The suspension of legal rights in detention, particularly rights to freedom of speech and assembly, has similarly been taken to imply the suspension of political life. In the case of Woomera, to recall Perera (2002; see also Nyers, 2006), additional exacerbating conditions might seem to confirm the internees’ public exclusion, not least the fact they were contained behind fences and barbed wire far away from public sight in an isolated part of Australia, some 270 miles from Adelaide.¹⁹ Such adjudications tend, however, to treat political space as already given rather than as performatively produced.

One of the best-known ways of thinking about the production of political space is Arendt's (1958) discussion of the 'space of appearance': 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me' (p. 198). This idea is central to her understanding of the relation between the public realm and politics. As she puts it, although all actions take place somewhere, the 'true space' of the *polis* 'lies between people' (Arendt, 1958: 198), which means a space of appearance potentially 'comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action' (Arendt, 1958: 199) and disperses as they disperse. The *polis* is not a specific physical location, then, but a space between subjects, a space of vulnerability we might even say, that can emerge whenever people act in concert, 'no matter where they happen to be', and that 'can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere' (Arendt, 1958: 198) – an account that might, at first glance, appear to support the claim that Woomera became a political space through the defiant collective bodily practices of the detainees. However, Arendt's is a largely decorporealized understanding of politics that prioritizes language and speech,²⁰ which suggests that, *in her terms*, embodied actions like lip-sewing and hunger strikes would not *ipso facto* count as political, at least not without being 'talked about over and over again' (Owens, 2009: 577), and could not, therefore, actualize political space by themselves.

Taking my distance from this view, I nevertheless want to hold on to Arendt's insight that political space is produced performatively via concerted action, with one caveat: that, as well as acknowledging the corporeality of such action, attention is also paid, as Butler (2015) suggests, to the role that materiality plays in the constitution of politics and political space(s). I am interested specifically here in how the corporeal actions of Woomera's detainees drew on the material conditions of detention – the material conditions of their vulnerabilization – in order to resist. My contention is that through their actions, Ali and his peers simultaneously divulged and contested the physical terms, circumstances, and deprivations of mandatory immigration detention materially enacted at Woomera.

Held in a form of extrajudicial detention (Fiske, 2016: 6) and denied freedom by the Australian state to communicate with the outside world (including with family), those who sewed their lips together 'communicate[d] their denied right to speak through the gesture of a muted, legally sutured, corporeality' (Pugliese, 2002), resisting in the process the power of the authorities endeavouring to regulate their conduct. When multiple persons collectively refused to eat, they reasserted control over the very bodies and behaviours that the detention regime sought to micromanage and direct (Fiske, 2016: 136–7),²¹ simultaneously exposing its harshness and, for a time at least, undermining its effective operation. The fence and the buildings of the camp became (drawing loosely from Rancière, 1999) a 'stage' for political protest; protest articulated corporeally through, for instance, Ali's deliberate jump onto the razor wire, the detainees' physical occupation of the roofs of camp buildings, and the holding aloft during their rooftop demonstration of placards, proclaiming 'Freedom or death' and 'Release or send back'.

Acting in concert with known and unknown others to deploy 'strategies of resistance that highlight[ed] the politics of their caged bodies' (Nyers, 2006: 119), and which impeded the camp's 'normal' operations, I am suggesting, generated modes of resistance specific to – that is, enabled and supported by – incarceration. Through these actions they

challenged what Bargu (2022) calls ‘the contours of the political as they are conventionally imagined’ (p. 294). This marshalling of vulnerability produced – for a time, at least – a politicized space, distinct from and in opposition to the established sphere of politics, one that may even have led to a reconfiguration of the wider *polis* given the impact of the protests. An immediate consequence was that the Immigration Detention Advisory Group (IDAG)²² brokered a deal that led, amongst other things, to the resumption of the processing of asylum claims by Afghan detainees (O’Neill, 2008: 94).²³ Supported by the media coverage they received, their protests succeeded in making their plight ‘perceptible’ to others and impelled the political order (primarily the state), which had refused to ‘see’ them as human in social and political terms, to address their concerns, making public what the Australian state wanted to hide. The bivalent nature of vulnerability, I am suggesting, served as a condition of possibility for this.

Conclusion


The examples cited in this paper certainly do not exhaust the multiple forms of vulnerability that exist today, or the wide range of groups experiencing them. Even though Woomera is now closed, refugees across the world continue to be subject to severe vulnerabilization that often engenders further occasions of hunger striking and lip-sewing, as well as other forms of self-harming corporeal protest not addressed here, like self-immolation (Tamer, 2021; for a discussion of the ambiguities of self-immolation see Page, 2018). None of what I have said in this paper should underestimate the cost or risks of resistance for those engaged in them, particularly for those in detention. Nor am I denying the very real and severe deprivations they suffer, including the often extreme mental and physical struggles they undergo. It is also expressly not my aim to fetishize vulnerability as an idea or to present it as an unproblematically progressive category. As others have noted (see Cole, 2016; Oliviero, 2018), the language of vulnerability has been used to bolster reactionary political agendas just as much as to support anti-racist or anti-sexist struggles. But to see lip-sewing and hunger strikes *only* as self-destructive, or as expressions of bare life, as they have so often been characterized, or to focus solely on their liminal siting is to minimize the political dimensions of those actions. In the principal example explored in this paper, the camp at Woomera, exclusion from the public sphere, conventionally understood, became a locus of politics. Its materiality, including its physical infrastructure, was used against the regime ordering the lives therein. Vulnerability’s ambivalence was exploited – both literally and relationally – in acts of resistance that rendered the internees more vulnerable to harm and punishment but also empowered them collectively to challenge the factors, processes and terms occasioning their vulnerabilization.

Vulnerabilization might be an inelegant term to employ but I use it because it captures the sociality of vulnerability: the fact that it is produced through determinate actions, policies and structures that render particular bodies vulnerable in precise ways in specific, determinate situations, whether through denying them rights, legal protections, and/or access to health care or sanitary conditions, or through the production of other forms of economic, social or sexual precarity not covered here – vulnerabilities that are made possible because of the body’s dependency on what is external to it. It is these

socially generated vulnerabilities that drive people to resist; that galvanize them to put their already vulnerable bodies on the line to protest the specific modes of vulnerabilization to which they are subjected.

Reframing vulnerability as an ambivalent proposition is important because it challenges the exclusive coupling of vulnerability with passivity and the inability to act, where to be vulnerable is to be powerless and where it is the (moral or political) responsibility of others to restore the possibility of agency to ‘the vulnerable’. Emphasizing the relational dimensions of vulnerability indicates that it is not a property of individual bodies or an attribute of specific persons. The account of vulnerability considered in this paper suggests that it is a way of being, arising from human dependency, that makes possible subjects’ navigation of their environments, their interactions with others, their endeavours to persist, and, though it cannot guarantee it, that also enables their capacity (collectively) to contest particular conditions of vulnerabilization. Not just the source of violence inflicted on one person by another, or of anguish and pain, though at times it is exactly both of those things, vulnerability is *also* a potential source of solidarity and collective action that, in certain circumstances, subtends and makes possible the politicization of spaces, including the spaces of vulnerabilization.

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Notes

1. The Australian government claimed Ali was Pakistani though the wider consensus is that he hails from Afghanistan.
2. Australia introduced mandatory detention in 1992. Woomera opened on 28 November 1999. Initially expected to accommodate 400 internees, by April 2000 it held close to 1500.
3. To be clear, I am not suggesting the actions I explore here have a single, unequivocal *political* meaning to the exclusion of all other meanings. To both observers and participants alike, they may signify in multiple, ambivalent, and even contradictory ways. What I want to foreground, however, is how they might be understood as modes of political resistance in this setting.
4. This includes women who have been identified with notions of femininity, dependence, and victimization (Butler, 2016; Butler et al., 2016; Gilson, 2014, 2016).
5. Vulnerability’s ambiguity, for Cavarero (2009), arises because the body is: ‘Irremediably open to wounding and caring’ and must live ‘totally in the tension generated by this alternative’ (p. 30).
6. For Ziarek (2013), this is the ‘positive meaning’ of vulnerability, though vulnerability also ‘signifies the damaging and indeed disastrous effects of domination and power’ (p. 68).
7. On the ambiguity of vulnerability see Gilson (2014, 2016, 2021).
8. Important questions have also been raised about the account of political subjectivity implied by this rethinking of vulnerability and resistance (Page, 2018; Rozmarin, 2020).
9. Although the acts of self-harm I am exploring are undertaken by those experiencing deprivation, injustice, or vulnerabilization directly, similar acts, and I can only note this here, have sometimes been carried out on behalf of others. For instance, in 2012 Pavlensky sutured his lips to protest the imprisonment of members of the feminist punk collective, Pussy Riot, and in 1963 Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc self-immolated in protest at the Vietnam War.

10. Here I think Page (2018) is right to suggest that there may be multiple modalities of agency linked to vulnerability, not all of which are directed towards resistance per se or to the particular types of action that Butler and, to a lesser extent, Gilson focus on.
11. This includes newspaper reports, a documentary, plus writings by academics, journalists, and former Woomera employees, some of which draw on interviews with the internees.
12. This is the title of a 2011 documentary made about Ali by Prospero Productions and broadcast in Australia by SBS.
13. Ali was, rather, the leader of and spokesperson for a group of Hazaras involved in the protest (Fiske, 2016: 117; O'Neill, 2008: 92).
14. These were not the first or last protests to take place at Woomera. There had been previous protests in June and November 2000, and there were further protests over Easter 2002.
15. Ali's protest was aimed, partly, at drawing attention to the plight of his sister and her children detained in Woomera and awaiting the processing of their applications while his brother-in-law had been 'admitted to Australia as a refugee' (O'Neill, 2008: 104–6).
16. For more on the politics of hunger strikes see Bargu (2014, 2022), Shah (2022) and Ziarek (2012).
17. Wilcox is referring to hunger strikes at Guantánamo Bay in 2013.
18. The three initials refer to the boat the refugee arrived on (e.g. WMA). The numbers (e.g. 365) are assigned by immigration officials (Nyers, 2006: 156 n. 73). It was recently disclosed that a similar mode of identification is used at Manston asylum processing centre in Kent.
19. Far away from public sight is not, however, completely out of it. In 2000, for instance, nurses at Woomera defied the terms of their contracts, forbidding them to make public comments, in order publicly 'to lambast conditions' in the camp (O'Neill, 2008: 31).
20. For critical readings of Arendt's theorization of the body, see the essays by Honig, Norton and Zerilli in Honig (1995). See also Butler (2015) for discussion of the relation between embodiment, action, and appearance. Arguably in disembodiment politics, Arendt also depoliticizes the body and how it is constituted.
21. As one detainee (Sayed) informed Fiske (2016): 'When we do something like that [go on hunger strike] it's like a self-independence type of thing', because ordinarily in the camp, 'you don't have the ability to make decisions' (p. 137). For more on detainee views on this and other protests see Bailey (2009) and Mann (2003).
22. The IDAG was a ten-person advisory committee established in 2001 by the government to assist in monitoring detention centres such as Woomera (O'Neill, 2008: 53). It reported to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship.
23. Unfortunately for Ali, his asylum claim was turned down.

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