Performing the human: refugees, the body, and the politics of universalism

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Contents

Asylum
Mehmet al Assad

Will you please observe through the wire
I am sewing my feet together
They have walked about as far
as they ever need to go.

Will you further observe
through the wire
I am sewing my heart together
It is now full of
the ashes of my days
it will not hold any more.

Through the wire
one last time
please observe
I am sewing my lips together
that which you are denying us
we should never have had to ask for.

1 The figure of the refugee and the embodiment of 'humanity'[1]

The poem by Mehmet al Assad, an asylum seeker who was detained in Australia, painfully encapsulates the tension between the perennial representation of refugees as epitomising 'humanity'[2] in the "liberal discourse of UN humanism"[3] (Hyndman 2000: 68) and the unequivocal denial of their humanity. Refugees are habitually constructed and conceived of within the framework of 'humanity' and 'the human', often as part of discourses[4] of humanitarianism and human rights (Rajaram 2002; Nyers 2006). However, the relationship between refugeeness (Nyers 2006) and humanity is not only vexed but also seemingly paradoxical:

> *The chorus of humanity…repeats throughout the saga of the refugee. And yet, despite the apparent universality of their condition, refugees are subjected to a wide variety of Othering strategies that, ironically, cast them as something less than human. The refugee is thus at once the purest expression of humanity and also its constitutive limit. What are the politics of being identified as "human", of belonging to the ever-elusive moral community of "humanity"? (Nyers 2006: xvi).*

This paradox exposes how the liberal UN humanism masks historical continuities of injustices, dispossession, violence, and colonisation that shape the world today (Barthes 1972: 100-102; Malkki 1995: 12-13; Hyndman 2000: 67-70; Young 2004). Further to this postcolonial critique of humanism, others have criticised the pervasive depiction of refugeeness as vulnerability, loss, and helplessness in the discourse of humanity (Malkki 1995; 1996; Rajaram 2002; Turton 2003). The disproportionate focus on women and children is also said to reinforce the representation of refugees as the embodiment of 'bare humanity' in need of rescue and protection (Malkki 1995: 10-11). By essentialising and universalising their experiences as refugees, such constructions of refugeeness de-historicise, de-personalise, and de-politicise their being (Malkki 1996; Turton 2003). Despite such criticisms, refugees themselves have used their bodies, as demonstrated by the act of lip-sewing mentioned in al Assad's poem, to reclaim their humanity and to appeal to the nebulous concept of 'humanity'. This paper therefore seeks to explore this relationship between the figure of the refugee and the idea of the 'universal human' through the following corporeal acts: disrobing by Tamil asylum seekers in protest against their deportation in the UK in 1987, and hunger strikes and lip-sewing by asylum seekers detained in Australia in 2002.

As with any other identity, refugeeness is a site of contestation where discourses regarding culture, society, economy, and politics constantly interact to construct what it means to 'be a refugee'. It is thus not a static, fixed state but a process of becoming (Malkki 1995; Nyers 2006). Most importantly, discursive constructions are not only produced by the social world but also by refugees themselves (Nyers 2006). Following feminist and queer theories[5], I argue that the body is a

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[1] I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Matthew Gibney; my parents who have supported me through all these years; and the people behind the Oxford Kobe scholarship, which granted me the opportunity to pursue my Master's degree.
[2] The modern, post-Enlightenment discourse of humanity is distinguished by its claim to universality (Feldman and Ticktin 2010: 7).
[3] Hyndman (1998: 247) conceptualises 'UN humanism' as a term to refer to the abstract, gender-blind, and race-neutral 'universal subject' based on the UN 'family of nations' established after the horrors of the Second World War.
[4] Discourse here refers to a group of statements that determine the boundaries of how a particular topic is or can be discussed and practised (Foucault 2002).
[5] Scholars specialising in feminist and queer theories have written extensively about the relationship between the body and identities: prominent scholars include Bordo (1993), Butler (1993; 1999), Grosz (1994), and Young (2005).

vital site of identity construction and materialisation, particularly with regards to the idea of 'humanity', as the body serves as a marker of and platform for the construction and enactment of individual and social selves. Being a body is arguably one of the most fundamental aspects of being human that allows us to experience the world, and to communicate, share, and understand ourselves and each other; the body is therefore universal in the sense that we, as human beings, are all embodied beings (Shilling 1993: 23; Synnott 1993: 3; Grosz 1994: 22; Turner 1995: 145). Whilst there is literature on the relationship between refugeeness and the body, the discussion is centred on the reduction of refugees to corporeality in relation to biopolitics, particularly the Agambean state of exception. This approach tends to focus on how the body is subjected to regulation and control by the state apparatus or the sovereign (Foucault 1978; Agamben 1998). The Agambean approach in particular has been widely critiqued by scholars who argue, for instance, that it diminishes and neglects refugees' agency through acts of resistance and subversion (Kibreab 2004; Peteet 2005), it overemphasises the power and reach of the sovereign (Butler and Spivak 2007), and that there are multiple ways of conceiving the political (Turner 2005; Rygiel 2012; Redclift 2013).

Given the rich discussion around the body and refugeeness within the framework of biopolitics, this paper offers an alternative approach to the issue of corporeality in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies: the body is not only subjected to regulation, surveillance, and discipline but also (re)produces, constructs, and resists ideas about identity and difference. Here, the idea of 'humanity' sits uncomfortably in the language of identity and difference: refugees, who have become nothing but human (Arendt 1968: 300) are represented as the "purest expression of humanity" (Nyers 2006: xvi) under humanism and yet subjected to countless measures, policies, and discourses that seek to subjugate and confine them to a state of alterity and thus justify their treatment as less-than-human. The biopolitical approach highlights how refugees are reduced to their corporeality and moulded into a "universal humanitarian subject" (Malkki 1996: 378). Nevertheless, refugees themselves have used their corporeality as a political and communicative tool to appeal to the impalpable community of 'humanity', using their bodies as a spectacular form of protest (Rajaram 2003).

Focusing on how the idea of 'humanity' is communicated through the body, this paper poses the following question: what do the acts of disrobing, lip-sewing, and hunger strikes communicate? It asks *how* 'the human' is constructed, performed[6], and communicated through these corporeal protests rather than *what* it is, based on the claim that being human is an ever-unfolding process and not a static state of being. It is by no means my intention to reify the representation of refugees as an embodiment of 'humanity'—a representation that often works against their dignity, well-being, and rights as pointed out by the critics mentioned earlier—but rather to explore how refugees' bodies are a site of struggle for the materialisation of the concept of 'humanity'. An investigation into the relationship between the body and 'humanity' from the perspective of the figure of the refugee may seem trivial considering the realities of violence and struggle refugees face daily. I argue, however, that a deeper understanding of what it means to be human reveals the relations of power involved in constructing the boundaries of who is considered worthy of being part of 'humanity'. I believe it is important to understand how we ourselves may be implicated in such relations of violence in our everyday lives, so that they can be challenged. Here, I draw on Hastrup and Elsass' (1990: 307) argument against anthropological advocacy, that it is only when we have an understanding of the world that it can begin to be changed. Moreover, as one of the most desperate acts of communication, it is important to delve deeper into the use of corporeality than to simply understand it as an instrumental tool. By unsettling the language of universal man that permeates today's globalising and internationalising world, this paper prompts us to question

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[6] Framing these acts by asylum seekers as a performance is not to make light of their struggles and suffering but to recognise their impact beyond the personal as well as the presence of an audience (Jeffers 2012: 97).

how being human is predicated on relations of violence and vulnerability, and the precarious nature of being[7], and embodying, the human.

The human body has a long history, though it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that scholars in Anthropology and Sociology began to dismantle the Cartesian dualism established by Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). The body began to be analysed not purely as a biological given and an instrument of the mind but as constructed by and constitutive of the social world (Shilling 1993; Synnnott 1993; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003). This paper follows the post-structuralist understanding of the body as a text that can be read and inscribed. Academics like Turner (1994; 1995) have challenged post-structuralism's 'disembodied' approach that fails to address the materiality of the body, claiming that there should be renewed focus on subjectivity, agency, and the materiality of the body (Turner 1994: 46). However, rather than dismissing the materiality of the body, post-structuralism merely claims that the body cannot be understood outside of discourses, that is, the body both constitutes meaning and that meaning is enacted or performed through it (Butler 1988; 1993). Although the materiality of the body may symbolise our commonality as human beings, the body is also where the idea of 'humanity' can fail to materialise. Just as "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 2011: 283), we *become* human through the embodiment of values, norms, and expectations regarding appropriate performance of humanness. The concept of performance thus comprises both normative aspects and the possibility of resisting them (Fuentes n.d.). In circumstances where one fails to materialise the human, we are forced to ask for which "we should never have had to ask for"[8] (al Assad 2002)—ask to be recognised as a human being.

In chapter one, I briefly review the conceptual evolution of the body in European thought, drawing on Greek philosophy, Christian thinking, and literature in Sociology and Anthropology. Following Reischer and Koo (2004), I claim that the two theoretical approaches of the symbolic body and the agentic body must be combined as the body not only signifies established norms and values but also carries the potential to transform them through the production of meaning. The chapter then discusses the relationship between the body and protest, with a particular focus on how marginalised groups whose words are rendered unintelligible use the body as an act of speech. In such circumstances, the body is able to materialise and visualise abstract claims and oft-invisible forces of oppression, inequality, and violence in front of an audience. Chapter two examines the three case studies: disrobing by Tamil asylum seekers at Heathrow against their deportation in 1987, hunger strikes staged by asylum seekers detained in Woomera in 2002, and lip-sewing by some of the hunger strikers in Woomera during the same period. Each analysis begins by positing interpretations of what the asylum seekers themselves were communicating through their bodies, followed by how these meanings were contested by the audience and subjected to re-inscription and/or delegitimisation. In the conclusion, I argue that all three case studies demonstrate the use of the body to perform the human by materialising shared elements of 'humanity'. Being human is therefore not a fixed state or something one *is*, but an unstable, leaking category that comes into being through corporeal performance.

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[7] It should be noted that the norms and socioeconomic and political structures of the world tend to allocate precariousness of life differently (Butler 2009: 3).

[8] This line also speaks to the violence and the process of Othering inherent in having to ask for fundamental protection as an act of charity (Rajaram 2003: 224-225).

2 The body in history, social theory, and protest

The body has been theorised in various ways over the centuries in European thought, though it was not until the 1960s that the body itself became a subject of analysis in social theory. This neglect of the body was largely due to the prominence of Descartes (1960) who conceptualised the body as a machine. He juxtaposed the body, an assemblage of material elements, with the metaphysical mind. This Cartesian mind-body dualism privileged the mind—encompassing rationality, knowledge, and culture—over the body, associated with nature and emotion (Synnott 1993; Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003: 381). This dualism can be traced back to ancient Greece, where different conceptualisations of the body depending on the system of philosophy were all nonetheless based on a soul-body dualism that often privileged the former. One of the schools of thought that later went on to shape not only influential philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato but also Christianity was Orphism which developed around the fourth century BC (Synnott 1993: 8-9). In Orphism, one of the gods Dionysus (the son of Zeus) is killed and eaten by the Titans, the sons of the Earth; Zeus then turns the Titans into ashes, from which human beings are purported to have emerged. Because the Titans had eaten Dionysus, the resultant human beings are partly heavenly and partly earthly (ibid). Orphism therefore saw the body as a tomb entrapping the soul, and asceticism—abstention from meat, wine, and sexual intercourse—was encouraged as a way of fostering the heavenly side and eliminating the earthly side of humans.

This dualism that saw the body as a hindrance to the cultivation of spirituality or soul continued to influence Christian thought. Under the teachings of Paul, the body was conceptualised as both an enemy—its biological functions such as hunger and sex[9] intervening with one's faith—and a temple that maintains a connection to Christ (Synnott 1993). The body also became the locus for mastering temptations and strengthening one's spirituality. For example, in the second millennium of Christianity, there was a shift in asceticism from accepting physical sufferings imposed by others, or accepting physical pain by omission (denying physical needs of the body such as sleep), to deliberately inflicting pain as atonement and imitation of Christ. Clothing also played a vital role in Christianity by disciplining the body (Masquelier 2005: 2). In these ways, the body was subjected to control and surveillance through disciplinary techniques including asceticism and clothing.

It was not until the corporeal turn in the 1960s and 1970s in Sociology and Anthropology that the body became a subject of analysis as a historical and sociocultural phenomenon rather than a biological given (Reischer and Koo 2004: 297). Reischer and Koo (2004: 298) identifies two theoretical approaches to the body and the relationship between the body and society: first is the symbolic body, which refers to the "representational or symbolic nature of the body as a conduit of social meaning", and the second is the agentic body, where "the body [is]...an active participant or agent in the social world". Douglas' *Natural Symbols* published in 1970 was one of the first to discuss the symbolic significance of the body and to highlight the interdependence of the physical body and the social world: "the social body constraints the way the physical body is perceived" (Douglas 2004: 72). As a text that can be read and inscribed, its meaning cannot be understood without a common vocabulary; how the body is read and what it symbolises is thus entirely context-specific. The second approach borrows heavily from phenomenology, in particular Merleau-Ponty's (2002) idea of the body as a means of situating oneself in the world, where the body mediates the relationship between the self and the world since the body is always *already* engaged in social relations (Crossley 1995: 44; Parkins 2000: 60). In this view, the body necessarily constitutes the agency of selves that creates possibilities for resisting and transforming systems of

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[9] I consciously use the term 'biological function' rather than 'biological need' as I recognise that the idea of sex being a biological need is increasingly thrown into question due to the notion of asexuality.

meaning (Reischer and Koo 2004). Reischer and Koo (2004) argue that these two approaches must be combined, as the body not only symbolises social values and norms but is also capable of producing meaning. The post-structuralist approach draws on this view, as it emphasises how meanings are enacted and performed through the body, which creates potential for subversion and transformation through performances that challenge dominant systems of meaning. In this way, the body is a site for contesting meanings and boundaries (Butler 1993: xii; 1999). This approach collapses the dichotomy between "what is done to the body" and "what the body does" (Crossley 1995: 43), highlighting their interconnectedness. This suggests that the body is constraining as well as enabling: although the body constitutes all of us as embodied beings and thus enables us to communicate and share experiences (Shilling 1993), it is also constraining due to the constant interaction between the symbolic and agentic aspects.

The body's communication never ceases. As a symbol, our bodies are constantly being read through the way we dress, demeanour, and physical markers (Goffman 1971); as an agent, our bodies may accept, resist, or challenge these processes of inscription and subsequent attributions. While Lunceford (2012: 6) claims that it "may be that the only time a body is not rhetorical [communicative] is when one is sleeping or dead", I would argue that even when asleep or dead, the body continues to communicate something about the individual and the moments that comprise their lives. This communicative potential and the commonality of the body among human beings make it a vital component in protests that are fundamentally about conveying a message through a spectacle (Sutton 2007). Whilst corporeal protests often do have objectives, achieving these aims is arguably secondary to their performative nature that seeks to fix attention onto their bodies that communicate their messages[10] (Souweine 2005). The political messages materialise through the body as its very physicality and the occupation of (public) space demand the attention of the audience. Corporeal protests are a call for a reflexive engagement, an invitation for the audience to situate their embodied selves within the protesting bodies. The utilitarian perspective that judges the value of protests by their ability to achieve their objectives may deem these performative protests "self-indulgent, flaky, even flippant" (Souweine 2005: 535). However, as the three case studies demonstrate, the strength of corporeal protests lies in their ability to speak the universal language of embodiment. As an "act of speech", the body communicates where words fail (Fierke 2013): this is why corporeal performance is characterised by Fuentes (n.d.) as the language of the Other whose words have been stripped of their intelligibility. The protesting body functions "not as an argument but as statement and spectacle" (Lunceford 2012: 17), eliminating the need for linguistic intelligibility, rearticulating the boundaries of political legitimacy, and reaffirming the place for emotion[11] and lived experiences in making political statements[12].

It is for these reasons that corporeal protests are frequently utilised by bodies onto which difference has been inscribed, for example, women[13] and African-Americans. The mere presence of bodies in spaces where they are normally absent or invisible can destabilise the existing order and attract attention (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003); simply standing silent in a public space can transform the body into a site of resistance (Lunceford 2012). For example, Foster (2003) examines

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[10] However, the nature of the body is such that it is impossible to exert complete control over what interpretations the audience will ascribe to corporeal protests; there is always a risk of dominant discourses being (re)inscribed onto the body (Sutton 2007; Fierke 2013), as the case studies will demonstrate.
[11] Discussing the role of emotion in self-immolation, Fierke (2013: 90-93) argues that emotions are inherently social and relational. They are not possessed by individuals but are situated within systems of meaning.
[12] See Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) for an in-depth analysis of the role of emotion in social movements.
[13] For women, the body is often the subject of protests—such as violence against women or body image (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003)—which makes it an important vehicle in making political statements.

the spontaneous sit-ins initiated by Black students against segregation in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960, where they simply sat at the white-only lunch counter until closing time. Sit-ins spread to other stores and public buildings, eventually covering the entire Southern USA. This is a prime example of how the presence of silent bodies prompted the audience to reflect and question the normalisation of difference inscribed onto Black bodies, that of race, which dictated the boundaries of their freedom. The anti-war movement Women in Black is another example. At the peace vigils in Jerusalem where the movement was established, women dressed in black held a sign 'Stop the Occupation' and claimed the Israeli public space in silence (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003). The public presence of female bodies even elicited rage in some spectators as it challenged the discursive framework within which female bodies are usually situated: motherhood (reproduction and child-rearing), sexual objectification, and chastity (domestication) (ibid). The strength of this protest in attracting attention and disseminating its political message lied in the disruption of the dominant meanings ascribed to female bodies. In both cases, the body was not only the medium for change but also a way of realising it (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003: 399) by calling for the audience to reflexively engage with the protesting bodies.

The appeal of the body also rests on its ability to visualise the violence inflicted upon certain groups in a society that is often insidious and hidden. As the saying goes, seeing is believing: by materialising and visualising abstract and distant realities and claims, the protesting body imparts a different reality, disrupts the established rhythm of everyday life, and draws attention to the gravity of the situation. This is perhaps most evident in the act of "protest suicide" (Andriolo 2006), an extreme form of corporeal protest. Fierke (2013) conceptualises protest suicide as political self-sacrifice, "an 'act of speech' in which the suffering body communicates the injustice experienced by a community to a larger audience"[14] (ibid: 37). The literal destruction of the body symbolises the destruction of the community in question, appealing to our capacity to imagine as embodied beings: what it feels like to perform such acts, and what compelled the protesters to take such acts (Andriolo 2006). Coupled with this capacity to imagine, the materialisation of injustice, inequality, and suffering through the body plays a vital role in generating emotional impact (Fierke 2013). As a spectacle, the interaction between the performative body and the audience is intersubjective and, more importantly, affective. Witnessing a protesting body, especially a suffering body, establishes an affective connection between the protesting body and the audience (ibid). Here, the oft-constructed opposition between emotion and rationality is challenged. Always situated within shared systems of meaning, emotions—understood as inherently social and relational—are value judgements in response to things that matter (Fierke 2013; Nussbaum 2001): it is "an expression of our own vulnerability to people and events that we don't control" (Fierke 2013: 91). Affective responses to corporeal protests therefore destabilise and expand the boundaries of the self (Nussbaum 2001: 300), suggesting one of the foundations upon which the hazy concept of humanity may be based.

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[14] Protest suicide is another interesting avenue to explore the relationship between the body and the human, since it is an exercise of trust in the abstractness of the human. This form of corporeal protest is based on the assumption that their death has meaning, that it makes a difference to others (Andriolo 2006: 107). If their lives are not recognised as lives, their death will not matter (Butler 2009: 14) and the whole premise on which this act is carried out crumbles.

3 Case studies

As mentioned above, refugees' reduction to corporeality and their subsequent construction as a silent, invisible, and abject mass (Nyers 2006; Jeffers 2012) is only one of the many facets of the relationship between the body and refugeeness. The cases of disrobing, hunger strikes, and lip-sewing demonstrate that refugees themselves have used their corporeality and speechlessness to make political statements[15]. Because they are often confined to a state of alterity where their voices are not heard or are rendered unintelligible, the silence of their bodies can speak louder than words (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003).

I use three case studies to explore the use of the body in performing the human: Tamil asylum seekers' naked protest at Heathrow Airport in the UK against their deportation in 1987, and hunger strikes and lip-sewing by asylum seekers detained in Australia in 2002. These cases were selected as each of them illustrates different uses of the body—the exposure of skin, the gradual decay of the body, and a highly visible physical injury to the body—in two liberal democratic states that purports to uphold liberal values of human rights and freedom whilst attempting to implement restrictionist policies since the 1980s and 1990s.

Naked bodies: disrobing at Heathrow

Beginning with Doukhobors, a radical sect of Christians originally from Ukraine thought to be the first modern naked protestors (Souweine 2005; Carr-Gomm 2010), various groups have staged naked protests, including anti-globalisation, animal rights, anti-war, and feminist groups. The meanings attached to and what constitutes nakedness are spatially and temporally contingent (Masquelier 2005; Sutton 2007; Levine 2008). Paradoxically, since nakedness is "embedded in the history and cultural baggage of different societies and are intertwined with the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression" (Sutton 2007: 142), it is impossible for one to be truly naked—to reveal oneself, as Berger (2008) argues[16]—since staging a naked protest always presupposes a gaze, eyes that clothe the naked body in histories, preconceptions, and norms. Nonetheless, the public traction of naked protests rests on its ability to destabilise the normalised social order of clothed human beings (Sutton 2007). The civilisation and privatisation of the body during the Renaissance (Elias 2000) established boundaries of permissibility[17], and revealing one's naked body became a private act labelled as 'obscene' if done in public in most societies, including the UK and Australia. This boundary of decency is subjected to panoptic control (Foucault 1977) rather than centralised or bureaucratic forms of control. The transgression of an unspoken but entrenched social norm strengthens the message communicated by naked protests (Lunceford 2012) and is a means to "engender difference, create spaces of resistance, or confront moral hegemonies" (Masquelier 2005: 8).

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[15] While the line between a political act and an act arising from mental distress is often blurred, these acts can be considered political insofar as their corporeal protests placed themselves in the public arena (Andriolo 2006: 107).

[16] Nakedness is often distinguished from nude. For example, Clark (1956) and Berger (2008) define them differently: whilst Clark (1956: 1) defines nakedness as deprivation (lack of clothing) and nudity as a form of art, Berger defines nakedness as being and revealing oneself and nudity as always subjected to a gaze, to be on display (Berger 2008: 54). This distinction, however, is not significant in this paper since the act of disrobing was clearly executed with an audience—therefore a gaze—in mind.

[17] It should be remembered that this line of decency or permissibility is also historically and culturally contingent (Lunceford 2012). Moreover, nakedness may be permitted in specific spaces such as nude beaches or public baths.

Tamils began fleeing Sri Lanka to seek asylum in the UK in the 1980s after the outbreak of what was to become a 26-year long civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Rao 1988; Spencer 1990). This was triggered by the anti-Tamil riots in 1983 which killed thousands of Tamils (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). Sources of this war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil populations had been brewing for some time, as the government successively failed to address the grievances of the Tamils, which unified the existing Tamil separatism even further in the mid-1970s (Spencer 1990).

On 17th February 1987, 64 Tamil asylum seekers arrived in the UK without valid travel documents (Cohen 1994; BBC n.d.). The government appeared to be particularly threatened on this occasion as it was not used to dealing with either the arrival of a group of asylum seekers or having them seek asylum at the port of entry rather than coming through the quota system (Pirouet 2001: 22). Fifty-eight of them were due to be deported immediately as the Home Office decided they did not qualify for refugee status, and were deemed as attempting to secure admission by "fraudulent means" (Cohen 1994: 84). It was then that twelve men from this group stripped down to their underwear at Heathrow Airport before they were led onto the plane that would have flown them back to Sri Lanka. Faced with this unexpected protest, confusion spread among police officers and the media was quick to latch onto the spectacular protest (ibid). The protest, which continued on the plane as they refused to sit down and fasten the seatbelt, was successful in at least temporarily delaying their deportation[18].
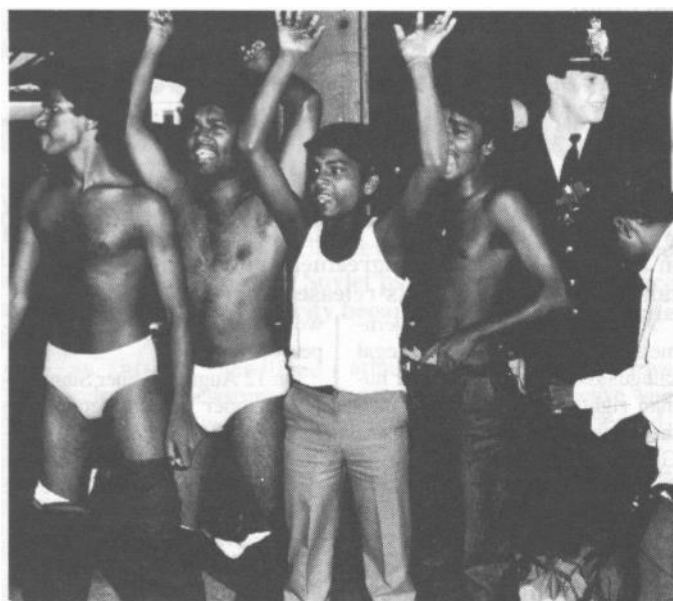
Sri Lankan Tamils strip at Heathrow airport, London, in protest at attempts by the UK authorities to return them to Sri Lanka. AI believes that no Sri Lankan Tamils should be sent back to Sri Lanka against their will.

Tamil asylum seekers' naked protest (Source: Amnesty International Newsletter, October 1987, p.8)

[18] The High Court ruled on the night of 17 February that the deportation be prevented until 23 February 1987, when they would have the opportunity to present their cases for a judicial review of the Home Office's decision to deport them (Murtagh 1987). On 20 August 1987, two of the naked protesters were ordered to return to Sri Lanka (*The Guardian* 21 August 1987).

What was the act of disrobing communicating? While I can only conjecture as I was not able to interview the protesters, it is important to differentiate between the intentionality of asylum seekers, and how the audience interpreted the corporeal protest. In addition to the instrumental use of the naked body as a means of bringing attention to the practice of deportation and slowing down this process as much as possible—which they succeeded in—the symbolic significance of the naked body needs to be explored further. Analysing the World Naked Bike Ride, Lunceford (2012) asserts that nudity signifies cyclists' vulnerability due to the lack of protection on the road and their harmlessness as a group of people staging a peaceful protest. Similarly, the asylum seekers' naked bodies were imbued with vulnerability and harmlessness communicated through the exposure of skin in all its rawness to a stranger's gaze. The asylum seekers' naked bodies not only symbolised their dual lack of protection—in Sri Lanka and the UK—but also their harmlessness and defencelessness, which challenge the dominant construction of asylum seekers as the threatening Other.

Due to the intimate nature of revealing one's nakedness, the act of undressing is usually reserved for private spaces and for those we trust (Lunceford 2012); to be naked is to expose one's sexuality, weaknesses, and the ugliness of the human body (Masquelier 2005: 2). Asylum seekers' act of public disrobing was thus a unilateral display of intimacy, a performance of their openness and susceptibility to hurt and injury. Here, it is important to note the unequal power relations between the naked asylum seekers and the clothed spectator. As an observer, the spectator arguably has more power over the object of their gaze, the protesters. The asylum seekers conferred even more power to the spectator through the exposure of their skin, symbolising their vulnerability as asylum seekers as well as human beings. Combined with the sense of intimacy, the stronger sense of inequality between the naked and clothed bodies acted as an invitation for the audience to (re)consider the structures of inequality—for instance citizenship and nationality—that constitute the present world, and their own vulnerability. In this way, the naked protest of Tamil asylum seekers communicated our shared vulnerability as human beings (Hoffmaster 2006), drawing attention to the fact that we live in a world of dependency (Butler 2009)—that our lives are interconnected, however distant they may seem, and that there is a moral imperative to assist others because the nature of the world is such that there are people who have to ask to be given what *we*, the audience, take for granted.

As a site for the materialisation of contesting meanings, the audience also inscribed alternative meanings to the naked bodies. Cohen (1994: 86) argues that it symbolised the amorality of the government response; the act of disrobing represented the government, stripped of all morality. In this way, the protest can be understood as a silent denunciation of the government based on the use of nakedness[19] as a shaming tactic[20]. Nakedness was used as a means of shaming the spectator by invoking a sense of embarrassment among the spectators (Lunceford 2012), particularly the government for the inadequacies and failures of the asylum system. More than that, however, public nakedness is strongly associated with being ashamed in Christian thought[21], where nakedness connotes spiritual disorderliness, sin, and shame: "To be naked was to be both ashamed

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[19] Had the naked protest involved women—or indeed children—the body may have communicated different messages since what is communicated through nakedness varies greatly depending on the gender of the individual. Female nakedness is associated with sexualisation, objectification, exoticisation, and object of the colonial and male gaze whilst male nakedness often signifies virility, strength, or even universality—as shown in scientific and artistic portrayals of 'humanity' (Sutton 2007: 143).

[20] For example, in the naked protest by Nigerian women against Chevron in 2002, female nakedness was used as a shaming mechanism (Turner and Brownhill 2004; *BBC* 16 July 2002).

[21] Some Christians did not agree. For instance, Charles Kingsley, an Anglican priest, advocated nakedness as a path to re-establishing an Edenic world (Masquelier 2005: 2); here, nakedness represents purity and innocence and a return to an era prior to industrialisation and Enlightenment.

and shamed" (Levine 2008: 191). In the Genesis, the consumption of the Forbidden Fruit led to the moment of shame, when Adam and Eve realised their nakedness and wore fig leaves to conceal their body. Although shame was initially directed towards each other, it later came to be directed towards the spectator (Berger 2008: 49). Because of the taboo associated with public nudity, naked protesters have been labelled "obscene" and even "morally offensive" (Sutton 2007: 141, with reference to naked protesters at the World Social Forum in 2003). Some Tamil immigrants—who settled in the UK before the 1980s—also described the naked protest by Tamil asylum seekers as "ungentlemanly political tactics [sic]" (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995: 243).

These terms, related to the relationship between nakedness and shame, can be interpreted as an allusion to the colonial discourse of nakedness/clothing corresponding to primitiveness/civilisation. Such discourses of propriety feed into the construction of asylum seekers as the Other against which citizens are constituted (Nyers 2006). Levine (2008) claims that nakedness has connoted primitiveness and barbarism since at least the 17th century, also pointing out the colonial logic in the construction of nakedness: despite the naked male body of sculptures and statues from ancient Greece symbolising civilisation and a standard of beauty and strength, the male body of "unclothed African, Australian, Aboriginal, or Pacific Islander signified...an absence of civilisation" (Levine 2008: 189-190). Therefore, in the colonial discourse, the naked body was a site of racialisation integrated into the 'civilising mission'. Naked colonial subjects were constructed as embodying a state of nature and lack of civility vis-à-vis clothed colonisers who embodied rationality, morality, and civilisation (Levine 2008: 192). The act of disrobing thus had the effect of also constructing the Tamil asylum seekers as the deviant Other (Leach 2003; Pickering 2001) who were prepared to strip to their underwear without shame in the spectator's eyes. This inscribed difference and deviance onto their naked bodies (Lunceford 2012), reinforcing the racialised logic of exclusion.

The naked body is therefore a site where both processes of inclusion and exclusion are performed (Masquelier 2005:5). On the one hand, it can communicate difference; on the other hand, it can communicate aspects of our shared humanity through the embodiment of vulnerability. While the idea of defiance and resistance (the protesting body) and vulnerability (nakedness) may seem contradictory at first, this is only because of the negative connotation attached to the latter. Vulnerability is not weakness: involving emotional risk, exposure, and uncertainty (Brown 2012), it is an acceptance of our powerlessness in a world comprised of forces and phenomena we cannot control (Hoffmaster 2006). A public performance of this inescapable condition of human vulnerability is therefore a demonstration of agency, courage, and resistance: "Human beings are at their most vulnerable when naked but, when engaged in a protest, are also strangely powerful...By standing with nothing they say everything about the human condition" (Carr-Gomm 2010: 133).

Woomera and Australia's mandatory detention policy

Hunger strikes and lip-sewing both took place in Australia in 2002 in the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (hereafter Woomera) opened in November 1999. The centre was built to hold 400 asylum seekers but by April 2000 it was housing 1,500 (Cox and Minahan 2004). By the time of its closure in April 2003, Woomera had become infamous for what has been characterised as "inhuman and degrading" treatment of asylum seekers by Justice P.N. Bhagwati, the Regional Advisor for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (CNN 31 July 2002), with several protests, riots, and incidences of 'self-harm'.

Australia's mandatory detention policy dates back to the late 1970s. In the period 1976-1981, a comparatively small number of around 2,000 Indochinese asylum seekers arrived by boat, who were processed as refugees upon arrival without much hostility by the Australian public or government mainly due to the fact that they were fleeing Communist regimes (Jupp 2002). The

'second wave' of asylum seekers who started arriving by boat from 1989, primarily from Cambodia, were put in a 'holding centre' and eventually moved to the Westbridge (now Villawood) Migrant Centre in Sydney (Phillips and Spinks 2013). In response to this sudden growth in the number of people arriving by sea, and the shift from asylum as a foreign policy issue to an electoral issue (Gibney 2001), the Port Hedland Centre was opened in 1991 to detain all asylum seekers while their claims were processed (Jupp 2002: 189). In 1992, the Keating government officially introduced the policy of mandatory detention through the Migration Amendment Act. Initially an 'exceptional' and temporary measure, it was subsequently extended to detain and deport anyone arriving in Australia without a visa—'unlawful' non-citizens—unless they have a valid claim to asylum (Phillips and Spinks 2013). The number of asylum seekers from the Middle East and Central Asia arriving by sea began to increase in 1997, reaching 3,800 by 2000 (Jupp 2002: 193). Many of them were fleeing the Taliban or Saddam Hussein's regime. In August 2001, the Howard government introduced the notorious Pacific Solution in response to the *Tampa* incident (Amnesty International 2002). This policy authorised the interception and transfer of all 'unauthorised' boat arrivals to offshore processing centres such as Nauru and Manus Island (Phillips 2012). This was the wider context within which the hunger strikes and lip-sewing at Woomera detention centre occurred.

Starving bodies: hunger strikes in Woomera

Often discussed as a 'non-violent' form of protest, hunger strikes have a particularly long history in Irish and South Asian anti-colonial and nationalist movements, with the two primary examples being Mahondas Gandhi's fasting and the 1980-1981 Irish hunger strikes (Ziarek 2008; McGregor 2011). The meaning attached to starvation is culturally and historically contingent, and emanates from the circumstances of the starver and the sources of starvation, which includes anything from famine, conflict, and disease to dieting (Ellmann 1993: 4). Hunger strikes are a particular form of *self*-starvation, where the dying body carries political messages and transformative potential. Lady Constance Lytton, one of the 12 suffragettes who went on a hunger strike in 1909, wrote in a letter addressed to *The Times* that marginalised groups use violence against their bodies when their words are stripped of their meaning (Ziarek 2008: 100). As a gradual death (Dingley and Mollica 2007), the self-inflicted violence of the hunger strike is an extreme form of corporeal protest utilised by the Other (Fuentes n.d.) that hinges on "dialectic between power and vulnerability, defiance and risk" (Sutton 2007: 144). Hence the starving body is often an internalisation of violence and oppression inflicted on a group—as in the case of Gandhi and the Irish hunger strikes—and an attempt to expose and shame the oppressor (Ziarek 2008). Although starvation is a highly individual act, the body of the hunger striker represents the collective condition of a community (Feldman 1991). Most importantly, self-starvation is a performance staged to force an audience "to recognise that they are implicated in the spectacle that they behold" (Ellmann 1993: 17).

Gandhi's hunger strikes[22] are an example of a hunger strike based on his position as a leader of the Indian independence movement, Hinduism, and pacifism. Gandhi undertook 17 fasts in his life, which were deeply rooted in the Hindu principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*) (Becker 2006). In contrast, the 1980-1981 hunger strikes[23] in Maze Prison in Northern Ireland against the criminalisation of republican prisoners were rooted in the Irish Republican Army's ideology of

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[22] Gandhi fought for equality between Dalits (low-caste Indians) and the higher caste Hindus, and against the hostility and violence between Hindu and Muslim communities.
[23] What began as a refusal to wear the prison uniform (named 'the Blanket Protest' as they wrapped themselves in blankets) in 1972 turned into 'the Dirty Protest' where prisoners covered the walls of their cells with excrement in response to the beating and ill-treatment of fellow republican prisoners.

violence and secularism[24] (Feldman 1991; Andriolo 2006). Bobby Sands became an iconic figure in the struggle. He saw the hunger strikes not as an instrumental tactic but as a ritual re-enactment of the British state violence and an inherent part of the Republican movement.

The hunger strikes by the asylum seekers detained in Woomera do not seem to fit these religious/secular and pacifist/violent discourses or a protest led by a charismatic leader. While the Woomera hunger strikes were clearly an act of "desperation and a plea for help"—as described by Graham Thom from Amnesty International (*The Guardian* 22 January 2002)—in an environment with hardly any other means of protest, the discursive and symbolic aspects require attention.

In 2002, around 200 asylum seekers detained in Woomera—mostly Afghans, joined by Iranians and Iraqis—staged a hunger strike from 14 to 30 January following a night of riots and an incident where an Afghan asylum seeker sewed his lips and leapt onto the razor wire surrounding the detention centre (*The Guardian* 30 January 2002; Madigan 2002; McGarry and DiGirolamo 2002). This was a protest against the length of asylum processing and the conditions of detention, further fuelled by the Australian government's decision to halt the processing of Afghan asylum claims in the wake of the collapse of the Taliban regime in December 2001 (*The Guardian* 22 and 30 January 2002; Corder 2002; Jupp 2002: 194; Parry 2002). The strike ended on 30 January as a result of negotiations between the protesters and the government's Immigration Detention Advisory Group (IDAG) who promised the resumption of asylum processing for Afghans, and an assurance by the government that it will process asylum claims more transparently (BBC 30 January 2002; Plane, Spencer, and Crawford 2002). Another hunger strike took place in June the same year for over two weeks involving 190 asylum seekers (Ahwan 2002; BBC 10 July 2002), again against the slow processing time and in solidarity with Afghan detainees who were threatened with repatriation by Philip Ruddock (the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) if they refused the payment of approximately £740 ($2,000) to return home 'voluntarily' (*The Guardian* 29 June 2002; Mazzocchi 2002).

Mahzer Ali leaping onto the razor wire at Woomera on 10 February 2002 against the treatment of children in detention. The banner reads: "Freedom or Death". (Source: SafeCom)

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[24] Hunger striking became a tradition within Irish republicanism in the 20th century after the 1917 Mountjoy Jail Strikes and the death of Terence MacSwiney, the Cork mayor and an IRA member, following a 74-day hunger strike in prison in 1920 (Feldman 1991: 218). There were successive republican hunger strikes in 1972, 1973, and 1976.

Before discussing what the starving body of asylum seekers was communicating, it is important to note the difference in the nature of the performer-audience relationship between a body with relatively easy access to public space—as in the naked protest by Tamil asylum seekers—and an incarcerated body (Cox 2015). In contrast to the naked protest discussed above, the hunger strikers did not have the same degree of proximity to the audience due to the nature of detention; Woomera is in a remote area with highly restricted access. This partly explains why they published letters to media outlets to accompany their protests. In a highly restricted space of detention, corporeality alone does not afford them enough visibility; words were required to first shed light on the *presence* of their bodies.

One of the hunger strikers in Woomera wrote in a letter: "[w]e have no hope, we see no future…We are ready to die…We only request the Australian people help us, otherwise we have no choice but to continue the hunger strike until the end of our life" (Debelle 2002: 6). It is clear that the hunger strike was used to bring attention to the issue of mandatory detention and to highlight the inhumane conditions they were forced to live in. It was better for them to die than to continue living in Woomera. The starving body was used to communicate that they were not living as such; they merely *existed* in the suspended space of detention. In this way, the 'disenfleshment' (Ellmann 1993) concurrently signified the hollowing out of their humanity and their claim to be treated as lives that matter (Butler 1993). As a gradual death, hunger strike can be understood as protest suicide; it is based on the same assumption that their death has meaning and affects others (Andriolo 2006: 107). The letter quoted above implies that the individuals involved would rather choose death than to live a life where their death does not matter.

As a protest against the processing time, the hunger strikes also reflected the specificities of detention and asylum: loss of control, uncertainty, and liminality. This notion of control is practical as well as symbolic. Practically, the body and food were the only aspect of their lives that they had control over (McGregor 2011). The hunger strikes can be construed as a way of situating themselves within the spatiotemporal limbo and uncertainty by capturing the only aspect of their lives that they could govern. Symbolically, self-starvation was a means to reassert themselves as human beings through the negation of the oppressive Other—the Australian government—who denied their very being (Koçan and Öncü 2006). The paradox here is that the self-denial of right to life became the denial of their reduction to lives that do not matter, as they regained control over their lives precisely through this destructive process. Reaffirming one's humanity through the manipulation of death, an inevitable aspect of life that most of us fear, is perhaps the ultimate embodiment of what it means to live.

In these ways, asylum seekers' starving bodies both reproduced and resisted the violence inflicted upon them by the Australian government through the interiorisation and materialisation of this very violence (Feldman 1991; Ziarek 2008). Again, like the naked protest by Tamil asylum seekers, hunger striking was an attempt to manoeuvre the unequal power structure, though taken to an extreme: "[b]ecause its secret is to overpower the oppressor with the spectacle of disempowerment, a hunger strike is an ingenious way of *playing* hierarchical relations rather than abnegating their authority" (Ellmann 1993: 21, emphasis original). In the section where this quote is taken from, Ellmann (1993) compares terrorism to hunger strikes, arguing that while terrorism attempts to annihilate the existing structures and subvert the authority in relations of inequality, hunger strikes use the relations of inequality to their advantage—thus do not immediately challenge the status quo—to make a political statement. Much like the Irish hunger strike, the internalisation of Australian state violence and the subsequent suffering of the protesters highlighted the disproportionality of the government's response (Feldman 1991), or in this case the lack of response. The re-enactment of state violence that constructed them as abject bodies emancipated

them from the state apparatus: the starving body was a part of the state, and yet also embodied resistance to state violence (ibid).

Most of all, the starving body was a call to the audience, "the Australian people", "to recognise that they are implicated in the spectacle that they behold" (Ellmann 1993: 17); that their status as citizens is based on the abjection of certain bodies. As Hassa Varasi wrote in a letter on behalf of the detainees, "[h]elp us get out from this hell hole…I ask you to imagine the suffering and persecution of these people [asylum seekers]" (Parry 2002), the protest was intended to disrupt the erasure of detained bodies through geographical (remote and offshore detention centres) and discursive (limited contact with the public) disguise (Cox 2015: 137). The spectacle of starving bodies was a call for the audience to engage their senses in—thus embody—the experiences of the asylum seekers through the act of imagining (Andriolo 2006), and to realise that they are part of this active process of forgetting.

The Australian government's response to these corporeal messages was to portray the hunger strikes as an attempt to "blackmail" the government into granting asylum. Philip Ruddock responded to the January hunger strike by saying that "…those who have been involved in these events should not expect other than lawful and fair and humane processing of their claims in accordance with our law" (*The Guardian* 30 January 2002) and that "[a]s hard as it is…there is no way we can succumb to duress" (Parry 2002). Similarly, John Howard, the Prime Minister at the time, spoke of "moral blackmail" regarding the hunger strikes: "It is being done to morally intimidate the Australian people and the Australian government into changing a policy" (Barkham 2002: 18). This discourse of moral blackmail constructs the asylum seekers' act of desperation as morally reprehensible due to the apparent manipulation of their pain and suffering as well as the emotions of the audience. This cunningly shifts the focus away from the policy of mandatory detention and the appalling conditions asylum seekers have to endure, delegitimising the protest of the starving bodies. Above all, the framing of the hunger strike as self-mutilation reflected a denial of the government's complicity in relations of violence, and transferred the source of violence to the asylum seekers (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005: 22).

This interpretive framework used by the government is part of the discourse of illegality. The construction of asylum seekers who arrive by boat as 'illegal' bodies has been ingrained in the public psyche through the habitual reproduction of discourses of illegality and deviance by the Australian government and the media (Pickering 2001). The government also tried to reinforce the deviance of asylum seekers by claiming that parents in Woomera were encouraging or even forcing their children to participate in the hunger strikes[25]. By juxtaposing 'genuine'/'legal' asylum seekers with the detained 'bogus'/'illegal' asylum seekers and 'queue jumpers' (Leach 2003), this discourse weakened the hunger strikers' communicative message by rendering the acts by 'illegal' bodies deceitful and manipulative. This recalls the claim that "the social body constraints the way the physical body is perceived" (Douglas 2004: 72): here, the illegality ascribed to detained asylum seekers' bodies constrained the ways in which the act of self-starvation was read.

This relates to the idea of detention as a state-sponsored spectacle (Rajaram 2003), which is implicit in John Howard's comment: "Mandatory detention is part of the process of sending a signal to the world that you cannot come to this country illegally" (Barkham 2002: 18). The delegitimisation of the hunger strike as an act of resistance was part of the spectacle of detention that reinforces and perpetually re-inscribes 'illegality' onto the bodies of asylum seekers. In opposition, the starving bodies of asylum seekers confined in Woomera sought to communicate

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[25] An asylum seeker in Woomera disputed this claim, stating that parents were in fact trying to persuade their children to stop participating (Debelle 2002: 6).

the length to which they have to go to reassert themselves as human, whose death matters. The slow death of the hunger strikers symbolised the sheer contrast between "noncitizen bodies" who exist in limbo and "embodied citizens" endowed with social and political rights and freedom (Cox 2015: 110) with the luxury of not having to resort to death to constitute themselves as human beings.

Lip-sewing: the spectacle of silence in Woomera

The final case study is the act of lip-sewing. Around 70 and 50 asylum seekers sewed their lips during the January and June hunger strikes in Woomera respectively (Ahwan 2002; *The Guardian* 22 January 2002). Cox and Minahan (2004) assert that this protest generated heated debates in the public arena and acted as a trigger event in the closure of Woomera in April 2003. While lip-sewing has mostly been staged by asylum seekers and refugees in processing and detention centres, physical confinement is not the main driving force (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005). For example, protesting against the treatment of asylum seekers in the UK, Iranian refugee[26] Abbas Amini went on a hunger strike and sewed his lips in May 2003 (ibid). The act of lip-sewing therefore seems to be rooted in what often constitutes refugeeness, including "despair, hopelessness, isolation, rightlessness, invisibility, and voicelessness" (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005: 19).

Again, I can only infer about the intentions of asylum seekers who sewed their lips from the information I have. Nevertheless, there are three possible approaches. The first is instrumental: it was a way of resisting feeding during the hunger strikes, as well as an attempt to regain public attention since the impact of the hunger strikes were beginning to wane as days passed. The second is that it was done out of desperation and mental distress. In fact, many sympathisers and supporters of the asylum seekers read lip-sewing as a reflection of desperation and psychological damage (Cox and Minahan 2004). While these two approaches are valid—and I am in no way denying the desperation and suffering of the asylum seekers who sewed their lips—they both neglect the symbolic significance of the body and the possibility for resistance through the agentic body. Most of all, it is impossible to ignore the symbolism of lip-sewing as a representation of refugeeness and an allusion to its complex relationship to the notion of humanity.

Like the hunger strikes, the lip-sewn bodies of the detained asylum seekers were used to internalise and communicate the systemic violence perpetuated by the Australian state (Rajaram 2004; Diprose 2005). The materialisation of violence asylum seekers continue to endure, beginning with the fleeing from their countries of origin and persisting into the state of detention, exposes the systemic and invisible violence inflicted not only by the Australian government but also by the institution of nation-state where processes of exclusion are essential to its survival (Pugliese 2004). Contesting the whitewashing of Australian history and the discourse of 'multiculturalism', Wills (2002) argues that asylum seekers disrupt the very foundations of Australia as a nation-state by revealing the violence inherent in the perpetual process of nation-state building that embraces embodied citizens whilst expelling noncitizen bodies.

In contrast to the hunger strikes, lip-sewing is a highly visible expression of suffering and distress. The asylum seekers inflicted physical pain to represent the internal pain and struggle that are invisible and cannot be expressed through language to the audience (Scarry 1985). Scarry (1985: 4) writes that to have pain is to have certainty, and to hear about another's pain is to have doubt because for the person in pain it is effortless to grasp it, whilst for the listener it is effortless *not* to grasp it. Sewing one's lips was therefore the materialisation of what asylum seekers were enduring

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[26] He began his protest after being granted asylum as he learnt that the Home Office was challenging the decision (*BBC* 30 May 2003).

every day in the detention centre, in the hope that this will affect the audience. Even with limited access by the media and lack of photographs to visualise this act, it is difficult to feel nothing when one imagines sewing one's lips.

Besides the communication of masked violence and invisible pain, the most symbolic and distinct aspect of this corporeal protest was the use of lips. The voicelessness of asylum seekers became their very voice through the physical act of sewing the lips. Their voicelessness, which is rooted in the status of refugees as a constitutive outsider to the political subjectivity within the normalised order of nation-states (Dillon 1998; Haddad 2008), materialises through the physical injury to the body and challenges the existing boundary of political subjectivity (Nyers 2006). By sewing their lips, the asylum seekers attempted to reconstitute themselves as human beings capable of political action, even in a space constructed for holding abject beings. Furthermore, Amini—the Iranian refugee who sewed his lips in the UK—stated that he sewed his lips to "give others a voice", that others have a responsibility to speak for him as he is speechless (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005: 20). In this way, the stitched lips can also be interpreted as a call for the audience to speak up to the injustice and violence asylum seekers were subjected to. Contrary to the government's claims explored below, the act of lip-sewing was not an attempt to influence government policy but to demand the audience to question the very premise on which people talk about asylum, nation-state, and borders (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005: 21).

Despite the communicative strength carried by the act of lip-sewing, the corporeal protest was subjected to what Pugliese (2004: 28) terms "body theft". The asylum seekers' bodies became appropriated into various Othering discourses disseminated by the government and the media in an attempt to de-humanise them (Leach 2003). The Australian government actively sought to erase the meanings asylum seekers themselves inscribed onto their bodies and to re-inscribe contesting readings of the stitched lips. For instance, Philip Ruddock infamously stated that lip-sewing is a "practice unknown to our culture…that offends the sensitivities of Australians" (BBC 20 January 2002). An irreconcilable difference between Australia and not-Australia (Perera 2002) were drawn to justify the continued implementation of mandatory detention and the Pacific Solution, declaring asylum seekers to be undeserving of protection due to value systems inherently different from those of Australian society (Leach 2003). This fundamentally delegitimised the bodies of asylum seekers and appropriated their corporeal acts into strategies of Othering. Moreover, the latter part of the quote reverses the role between the perpetrator of violence and the victim (Pugliese 2002): 'Australians' and *their* culture and morality become the victim of violence and barbarism displayed though the sewn lips of 'self-mutilating' asylum seekers (Pugliese 2004: 28).

It is worth noting just how pervasive this framing of lip-sewing as being *culturally specific* to asylum seekers from the Middle East such as Afghanistan and Iran was (Cox and Minahan 2004). For example, speaking about the lip-sewing protest carried out by Amin in the UK in an interview with BBC, Michael Peel, the senior medical examiner at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, said "…I presume it's [lip-sewing is] part of certain cultures as a way of protesting. A large proportion of people in the Australian case were from the same part of the world [as Abbas Amini]—Afghanistan and Iran" (BBC 27 May 2003[a]). Similarly, while recognising that lip-sewing symbolised voicelessness and helplessness, Michael Duffy, a journalist based at the Woomera detention centre in 2002, told the BBC: "[t]he lip-stitching crisis shocked many Australians and was indicative of a *cultural difference* in approaches to protest action, but also the hopelessness those seeking asylum often feel… Many asylum seekers from the Gulf region have learnt a style of fervent protest *unfamiliar in the western world*" (BBC 27 May 2003[b], emphasis added). In referencing 'culture', much like the government response to the naked protest by Tamils, Phillip Ruddock and others implicitly drew on the colonial discourse of civilisation, where civil/ised Australian bodies are juxtaposed with bodies confined in not-Australia where they

engage in irrational and uncivilised activities (Cox and Minahan 2004: 294). By framing the bodies of asylum seekers in this discourse of civilisation, the Australian government diverted attention from the Australian asylum system that created the conditions that compelled the asylum seekers to take this action in the first place (Jeffers 2012: 103).

As in the response to the hunger strikes, the Australian government also invoked the discourse of moral blackmail. John Howard's speech (4 September 2001) emphasised Australians' "right to express their views without fear of intimidation, or without fear of threats or any kind of physical violence or physical harm…*we* settle our disputes through debate and not through physical force. And that is the *Australian way* and the *Australian tradition*" (emphasis added). Here, the discourses of moral blackmail and civilisation are combined to disguise the government's culpability in (re)producing the conditions asylum seekers live in, and framed the act of lip-sewing as a cunning move to influence government policy (Rajaram 2004), thereby labelling it as an attempt to manipulate the emotions of the audience.

This discourse of moral blackmail was interwoven with the infantalisation of asylum seekers (Jeffers 2012: 105). This quote epitomises this argument: "…millions of parents who have raised toddlers to be civilised…[have] learned that pandering to someone who is banging their head on a floor or holding their breath until they turn blue just reinforces bad behaviour" (Bolt 2002 quoted in Cox and Minahan 2004: 294). Asylum seekers were represented as childish and undeserving of public sympathy because doing so will reinforce "bad behavior", that is, arriving in Australia 'illegally'. Australia took on a parental and pedagogic role vis-à-vis the asylum seekers who were relegated to "spoiled children" making irrational claims (Jeffers 2012: 105).

Another Othering discourse focused on the treatment of children by asylum seekers. False reports[27] of asylum seekers forcibly sewing children's lips in an attempt to gain publicity circulated (Leach 2003; Cox and Minahan 2004), which constructed the asylum seekers as exploiting children—who are generally considered to be particularly vulnerable[28]—to morally blackmail the Australian government to influence policy. Reference to the mistreatment of children by asylum seekers in the discourse of Othering was not new; in October 2001, false[29] claims were made about some of the 219 asylum seekers (mostly from Iraq) on the vessel *Adelaide* throwing children overboard[30] (Cox and Minahan 2004). The government also threatened to remove from parents the four boys who sewed their lips (*The Guardian* 22 January 2002), with Philip Ruddock commenting: "Children in the proper, positive care of their parents don't sew their lips together, do they?" (Barkham 2002: 18). This lionises the Australian government as morally superior and the protector of these children who have, in their view, been incorporated into the 'irrational' asylum seekers' agenda.

What all of these discourses of Othering did was to cast the corporeal protests as unintelligible; the audience could not make sense of the words spoken in the form of stitched lips. In *Excitable Speech* (1997: 136), Butler elucidates the interplay between the intelligibility of speech and the viability of the subject: "[i]f the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject is called into question". In the case of lip-sewing, this flow from unintelligible speech to the viability of the

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[27] No evidence was found to support these claims (Cox and Minahan 2004).
[28] The identification of childhood and children with vulnerability, helplessness, and need for protection has been challenged (see Hart [2006] for an overview).
[29] The inquiry by the Senate found no evidence for such event, and the photographs were falsely released (Leach 2003).
[30] Leach (2003: 26-27) traces how the report by Commander Banks of the vessel that asylum seekers seemed to be "preparing to throw a child overboard" became "[asylum seekers are] throwing children in the water", with "child" becoming "children" and the word "preparing" eventually being dropped altogether.

subject being discounted also seemed to go the other way. The bodies of asylum seekers (the subject) were already delegitimised through the inscription of 'illegality', making their act of speech unintelligible. At the same time, the discourses of Othering made their act of speech unintelligible, reproducing them as abject beings. It is no wonder then that Jeffers (2012) is pessimistic about the possibility of the act of lip-sewing fostering empathy or even sympathy because of the reproduction of abjection based on its unintelligibility.

Lip-sewing was therefore an act of resistance to the inscription of Otherness, particularly 'illegality', onto asylum seekers' bodies which was used to justify their confinement in inhumane conditions. The corporeal protest was an attempt to speak out against the ceaseless process of erasure and abjection of 'illegal' bodies, and to speak to the audience through the sewn lips by internalising and materialising the violence asylum seekers were subjected to. As Cox (2015: 137) puts it eloquently, "[t]o represent or reproduce the injuries of others is to instrumentalise pain as a public condition, drawing attention to a common human vulnerability to injury, and thereby up the stakes of a community's knowledge…of how pain comes to reside in the bodies of those it excludes". Lip-sewing symbolised at once the violence inflicted upon them and a call to the audience to imagine this pain and their implication in the relations of violence. In this way, the corporeal protest sought to reveal how our lives are intricately linked to each other's, and how citizens' intelligible words and viable bodies depend on the silence and abjection of noncitizen bodies (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005).

4 Conclusion

Posing the question *what do the acts of disrobing, lip-sewing, and hunger strikes communicate?,* this paper explored how elements of 'the human' are constructed and performed by asylum seekers through the corporeal acts of disrobing, hunger striking, and lip-sewing. All three acts communicate the invisibility, voicelessness, and vulnerability of refugees. As attempts to resist their dehumanisation and reconstitute themselves as human beings, they all seemed to appeal to some form of universalism: nakedness, death, and violence at the heart of perpetual nation-state (political community) building. However, the case studies also highlight the tension between two aspects of these corporeal protests: what the asylum seekers sought to communicate through their bodies, and how the audience read them. The naked protest by Tamil asylum seekers communicated shared vulnerability as human beings and harmlessness through their naked skin; the hunger strikers sought to reconstitute themselves as bodies that matter through the materialisation of violence that denied their rights and freedom; and lip-sewing was a highly symbolic act that, again, internalised and visualised the violence and speechlessness to call on the audience to reconsider their positionality. These meanings, generated through the agentic body that sought to resist the differences inscribed onto their bodies and to constitute a new social reality through corporeal performance, were subjected to contesting discourses that thwarted the audience from reading the bodies as the protesters wanted.

This appears to reiterate the poststructuralist claim that the body cannot exist outside of discourses; that, as a text, its materiality is dependent on systems of meaning to be understood. Because the body always *already* exists in the social world, the asylum seekers' bodies that were already read as suspicious, 'illegal', and Other seemed to prevent them from communicating their messages in the first place. This underlines the problem with post-modernism generally, that it posits an understanding of the world "where no one can apprehend the whole [comprised by other beings apart from our own] because no one can know (or approach) that which exceeds the

bounds of her own [embodied] experience" (Downs 1993: 417). This dilemma stems from the very nature of 'experience', which creates an enduring distance between human beings. There are certain 'knowledges' that can only be gained from lived experience rooted in one's identity, such as experiences of racism, sexism, or indeed of 'being a refugee'. In all case studies examined in this paper, refugees' corporeal protests to reclaim their humanity seemed to be counteracted by discourses that framed them otherwise. Does this suggest that the body itself is not sufficient in performing the human and re-constituting the boundaries of legitimacy? I argue that since the body is at the intersection of text and the social, it has the potential to challenge existing world orders. The body is the vehicle through which our ability to imagine others' experiences, lives, and being can be cultivated, precisely because we are all embodied beings. While communicating the differences that perhaps cannot be filled as long as we exist as separate embodied beings, the protests demonstrate that the body plays an essential part in prompting each of us to examine the commonalities we may have with seeming Others, purely because we live through our body. With many of us having had the same or similar experiences, it is possible to imagine the piercing sensation we would feel as the needle binds our lips; or the unexpected howling of the body called hunger; or the shame or trust involved in the act of undressing. No matter how remotely similar, it is these everyday experiences that form the basis for connections as human beings, and the basis for imagining Others as human beings. While undeniably part of the social world that constrains the readings of the body (Douglas 2004), the body carries with it the potential to move and engage the audience in ways that other forms of protests cannot by symbolising and performing our commonality through the physical body.

Moreover, this paper demonstrates that performing the human involves both identification *and* differentiation: it is a dialectical process that involves the body both as a text to be read and as a site of social contestation (Downs 1993: 423). The strength of corporeal protests lies in the particularity of the body in carrying political messages: as an act of speech without verbal communication, asylum seekers' protesting bodies did attract media attention and generate public interest and discussion, forcing the government to respond. Indifference is the ultimate form of erasure, and the corporeal protests refused to let that happen. This was the case even in Woomera, which is usually shielded far from the public gaze. Further, the affective impact—whether that be shame, embarrassment, sympathy, empathy, or pity—of the naked skin, the starving body, and the sewn lips on the audience cannot be denied. At least in the context of the UK and Australia, the body elicited reactions that are very particular to our nature as embodied beings.

The body as a site of struggle between identification and differentiation also sheds light on the nature of being human. It demonstrates that being human is not what we are but what is practised and performed. It is a process of becoming as well as un-becoming—un-becoming because of the constant interaction between the symbolic body and the agentic body, as shown by the struggles of refugees to be treated as human beings. Indeed, the case studies demonstrate that it is not an "abstract nakedness" (Arendt 1968: 300) that gives rise to a concrete existence as a human being; it is also the performance and embodiment of what constitutes the human that materialises the subject as a human being (Zylinska 2004). The language of humanity within which refugees are often framed is thus not an unproblematic category to which everyone belongs and something that everyone simply *is*. For some, it is a being that needs to be fought for, to be lived, even by chipping away one's flesh. It is not that there should be a "collapse of the human itself as a bounded category" (Shildrick 1996: 1); rather, the category of the human is always leaking, fluid, and overdetermined.

In these case studies, invisibility and voicelessness that often constitute refugeeness became the source of resistance, and the very relations of violence that rendered them inhuman were used to assert their humanity. The body was used to reveal the symbolic and structural violence of the

world that each of us embody, which makes everyone complicit in drawing the boundaries of who is considered a legitimate body and a human being (Cox 2015). Even if we accept the view that the Self is intrinsically embedded in Otherness (Bhabha 1986; Butler 1993)—that the nonhuman provides the constitutive outside for the human (Feldman and Ticktin 2010)—this is not a fixed state. By encountering bodies onto which difference has been inscribed, there is always a possibility for resisting and transforming the relations between the nonhuman and the human and the boundaries within which they exist (Haraway 1994; Butler 2011), as illustrated by the asylum seekers' acts examined in this paper.

> *I am sewing my lips together*
> *that which you are denying us*
> *we should never have had to ask for.*

The corporeal acts performed by the Tamil asylum seekers and those detained in Woomera shared the same message as Al Assad's poetry: they sought to make the audience question their positionality in the world and to bring them to the realisation that our lives are intertwined and implicated in relations of violence that produce bodies that matter and bodies that do not matter (Rajaram 2004: 224). It is only through situating our bodies within a "community of bodies" (Diprose 2005: 390), comprised of bodies involved in various processes of inclusion and exclusion, that the notion of the human comes into existence. The acts of disrobing, hunger striking, and lip-sewing communicated the precariousness of being and the undeniable web of dependency that make up our lives.

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