

**The Precarious and Political: Undocumented Immigrant Activism, Rights
Claims, and Networks of Solidarity**

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Abstract

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Over the past decade, the world has seen a steady growth of the political mobilization of undocumented migrants and pro-immigrant solidarity activists collectively demanding and enacting the non-citizen's right to equality. Their struggle is one of human rights and citizenship, and many of these political mobilizations can be understood through an intensification of stricter border regimes and immigration enforcement. Given the precarious condition of undocumented immigrants, engaging publicly and politically is a risky strategy. The central question of this thesis aims to uncover what sort of political actions are available to undocumented immigrants, how they contest their exclusion, and how they build political links with broader communities of political actors. I argue that despite their precarious conditions, undocumented immigrants manage to find different ways of acting politically depending on their 'level' of precariousness and how they are able to develop networks with others. Democratic actions such as grassroots campaigns, the New Sanctuary Movement, and detainee hunger strikes reveal the ways the undocumented claim their rights, and the importance of community and solidarity in actualizing political agency.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4-6
Defining the Precariousness of Undocumented Immigrants.....	6-10
Varying ‘Levels’ of Precariousness.....	10-14
Chapter One: Immigrant Discourse and The Impurities of Democratic Politics.....	15-18
Ranciérian Theatrocracy: What does it mean to act politically?.....	19-21
The Power of Undocumented Mobilization: Rendering the Invisible, Visible.....	21-28
The US New Sanctuary Movement.....	29-33
An Abolitionist Perspective of the Sanctuary Movement.....	33-36
Immigrant Deservingness.....	37-42
The Impurity of Democratic Politics.....	42-45
Conclusion.....	45-48
Chapter Two: Hunger Strikes and The Political Significance of Storytelling.....	49-53
Hunger Strike as an ‘Embrace of the Abject’	54-56
Hunger Strike as an ‘Alternative Sovereignty’	56-59
Forging Relationships of Solidarity in Detention.....	59-62
Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat.....	62-69
Conclusion.....	69-70
Conclusion.....	71
Bibliography.....	72-79

Introduction

In 2006, Americans were witness to pro-immigrant mass demonstrations that broke out across major cities throughout the country. Millions of immigrants and their supporters took to the streets against federally proposed anti-immigrant legislation. The protests were considered remarkable for their focus on and participation by people lacking formal citizenship in the political system they confronted. Many of the demonstrators were themselves non-citizens who lived and worked in the United States as undocumented individuals. Recognizing a glaring risk, the demonstrations enabled the mobilization of non-citizens as they made themselves visible and audible through publicly articulating certain claims. The marchers sought to collectively counteract the feeling of constantly living in fear and being rendered invisible, demonstrating on “issues of dignity and recognition” (Beltrán 2009, 605). By stepping out into the open and marching, the immigrants attempted to appropriate their own narrative and define their identities as claims to political existence while attracting a great deal of media attention. Scholars have turned to the events of the 2006 protests, arguing that the “the demonstrations can be best understood as a moment of initiation and an inaugural performance of the political” (Beltrán 2009, 595). Such powerful demonstrations of democratic action begin to uncover the significance of examining the political character of undocumented immigrant activism.

Over the past decade, the world has seen a steady growth of the political mobilization of undocumented migrants and solidarity activists. In response to the expansion of immigrant policing, detention, and deportation, they have demanded and enacted the non-citizen’s right to equality despite their status as “illegal.” The world has seen the growing power of “deportation regimes” around the globe that have enforced laws and policies that serve to illegalize millions of migrants and establish a state apparatus to surveil, identify, detain, and deport these

individuals (De Genova & Peutz 2010; Gonzales et al. 2019). As a result, undocumented activists have organized in collective ways in an attempt to gain voice in hostile political environments that render them invisible and voiceless. In acts of protest against the injustices of modern immigration enforcement policies, undocumented immigrants have engaged in forms of political activism ranging from demonstrative actions such as rallies, street marches, strikes, occupations of public spaces, and hunger strikes, to other types of activism, such as political campaigns, story-telling, and social media platforms, among others. While all different modes of attempting to claim visibility, they all aim to bring attention to the undocumented's long term presence in states where they live with the constant threat of deportation as well as the injustices of current migration policy.

These acts may be understood as an attempt by the undocumented to act in democratic ways to claim their rights. But, as Karen Zivi points out, "the relationship between rights and democracy is not, and has never been, so clear-cut" (Zivi 2011). Even so, there has been a significant number of scholars who have made progress in "conceptualizing migrant and detainee activism 'from marginal spaces,' through theorizing political subjectivities and acts of noncitizens" that help in understanding the political character of these unexpected claims to equality (Montagne 2017, 4). As such, we are forced to consider how we can conceptualize undocumented immigrant activism despite the extremely limited opportunities for success. In this context, I aim to push this discussion forward in examining how undocumented immigrants act politically and, in doing so, asking what this reveals about democratic action and political agency. Therefore, the central question of this thesis aims to uncover what sort of political actions are available to undocumented immigrants, how they contest their exclusion, and how they build political links with broader communities of political beings.

Undocumented immigrants, who are in extremely vulnerable and precarious situations, still find avenues to act in political ways and to blur the boundary between citizen and non-citizen. As I will demonstrate in the following section, undocumented immigrant precarity can be theorized through Hannah Arendt's understanding of "rightlessness" and "legal personhood," and Ayten Gündoğdu's work which serves to renew Arendt's approach to rights (Arendt 1951; Gündoğdu 2015). Given the precariousness of migrants, the undocumented can be rendered rightless at any moment, are deportable in most cases, publicly risk detainment, and, the minimal access to rights they do have, can be undermined with impunity. Even with their precarious conditions, they choose to enact a form of equality and act as citizens even though they don't have the legal authority to do so. I argue that, despite their precarious conditions, undocumented immigrants manage to find different ways of acting politically depending on their 'level' of precariousness and how they are able to develop networks with other political actors in enacting their equality.

In order to make this argument, I will first turn to Hannah Arendt and Ayten Gündoğdu to define the precariousness of undocumented migrants. While Gündoğdu makes a legalistic argument in terms of migrant rights claims, I aim to look at undocumented activism in terms of the movements that emerge and how we can understand the political character of those actions. In laying the groundwork for understanding the precarity of undocumented immigrants, I propose three different types of activism that denote varying levels of undocumented precariousness. I aim to explore how varying levels of precarity—depending on certain legal recognition, connections with other political actors, and location—correspond with varying possibilities of activism that give the undocumented an avenue of actualizing their equality, regardless of citizenship status.

Defining the Precariousness of Undocumented Migrants:

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of precarious is a situation “dependent on chance circumstances, unknown conditions, or uncertain developments,” that is “characterized by a lack of security or stability that threatens with danger” (“Precarious,” Merriam-Webster). In using the term precarious to denote the contemporary conditions and experiences of undocumented immigrants, I note that it takes on a new meaning when applied to political beings. Undocumented immigrants can be considered precarious just in the very state of them as “undocumented,” and consequently, in a status of statelessness. As Hannah Arendt demonstrates, the condition of being stateless works in tandem with the condition of being rightless. To understand the idea of rightlessness as the non-citizen stands, the concept of rights is imperative in understanding how and why the undocumented find themselves in this condition of precarity. Therefore, I will turn to Hannah Arendt and Ayten Gündoğdu’s contemporary adaptation of Arendtian conceptualizations of rights. By tracing a theoretical understanding of rights and rightlessness, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which the precarious status of the undocumented immigrant arises.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt exposes the paradox of universal human rights: though rights are innately given to individuals based on their humanity alone, they seem to evaporate in the very moment that an individual becomes nothing other than human in the condition of being stateless (Jurkevics 2017). In her chapter on “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” Arendt explores the transformation of the state into an instrument of the nation. After World War I, the multi-national empires had collapsed resulting in a dissolution of solidarity among oppressed nations. Arendt outlines the division of

state into four national elements: state peoples, unequal partners, minorities (only nationals could be full citizens), and stateless peoples (displaced persons). She argues that the rights of man are premised solely on national sovereignty and the concept of a nation-state, unavailable to national minorities and immigrants, and thus rendering the stateless in a subsequently “fundamental situation of rightlessness” (Arendt 1973 as cited in Gündoğdu 2015, 91) Therefore, only if one belonged to a nation could they exercise human rights, as rights can only be enforced and guaranteed through the government of a nation-state. In response, Ranicière asserts that Arendt’s claims thus render the Rights of Man “void” (Ranicière 2004), while other scholars argue that contemporary struggles require that we move beyond Arendt’s claims of an irresolvable contradiction (Benhabib 2004). In *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*, Ayten Gündoğdu enters this debate in “politicizing rights by insisting on the agency of migrants, who span the precarious gap between man and citizen, and who pose a unique challenge to the boundaries of political belonging” (Jurkevics 2017). In turning to Gündoğdu’s chapter entitled “Borders of Personhood,” I aim to uncover the conceptualization of undocumented immigrant precariousness.

In this particular chapter of her book, Gündoğdu draws on Arendt’s account of *persona*, the Latin term for stage mask, and Arendt’s understanding of *persona* in terms of legal personhood. The artificial mask of *persona* “had to hide, or rather to replace the actor’s own face and countenance, but in a way that would make it possible for the voice to sound through” (Gündoğdu 2015, 99-100). In her discussion on personhood, Arendt argues “that it is the artificial mask that makes a human being entitled to rights” (Gündoğdu 2015, 100). In the absence of that mask, man is “stripped of all political and legal rights and duties,” and appears to others as existing outside of the law (Gündoğdu 2015, 100). From an Arendtian perspective,

Personhood, or the artificial mask provided by law, is important, as it allows public appearance without the pervasive fear of arbitrary violence and enables rights claims to be articulated. Without this mask, one is relegated to a certain form of civil and social death. (Gündoğdu 2015, 92)

Gündoğdu highlights that legal personhood is “not an inherent essence,” and thus, “such possibilities of qualifying and evading personhood are nowhere more visible than in the cases of asylum and immigration, due to the centrality of the principle of territorial sovereignty to the ordering of the international system” (2015, 92-93). With this understanding, Gündoğdu suggests that the state of “rightlessness” requires the examination of “various practices that undermine the legal personhood of migrants” (2015, 93). Consequently, Gündoğdu then underscores the persistent precariousness through differing ways of undermining the personhood of migrants in our contemporary age of rights.

Given their status as essentially stateless, asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants “can be confined with very limited, if any, access to law” (Gündoğdu 2015, 91). According to Gündoğdu’s understanding of the precarious legal personhood of undocumented immigrants, she emphasizes the shift from citizenship to personhood as the basis of entitlement to rights. Therefore, non-citizens that exist in a state of rightlessness “in the absence of a political community that could recognize and guarantee their rights” are “deprived of legal personhood as well as a right to action, opinion, and speech” (Gündoğdu 2015, 91). From an Arendtian perspective, Gündoğdu highlights the contemporary manifestations of rightlessness:

‘Rightlessness’ denotes the fragility of those formal guarantees, which can be unmade in ways dispossessing various categories of migrants of their legal standing. Within this new context, the term alerts us to the precarious legal, political, and human standing of those who are juridically or effectively deprived of the protections of citizenship status. (2015, 107)

The precariousness of undocumented immigrants arises from the ways in which territorial sovereignty seriously undermines their legal personhood, especially in the condition of being stateless, in which we can come to understand “‘rightlessness’ not as the absolute loss of rights but instead as a fundamental condition denoting the precarious legal, political, and human standing of migrants” (Gündoğdu 2015, 93). Therefore, it is not that they are rightless completely, but their precarity arises in the fact that they can be rendered rightless at any moment. As non-citizen immigrants are stuck under the category ‘undocumented,’ they are deprived of everything, including the legal framework to pursue and claim their rights. Due to the insecure legal standing of undocumented migrants, rendering them effectively voiceless and invisible, the additional level of deprivation they face as a result of the denial of their existence through normalized language of the citizen further inhibits their ability to gain these rights. In acknowledging the precarious status of undocumented immigrants and the ways in which their precarity arises, I note the significance of undocumented immigrants who engage in political activism nonetheless.

Varying ‘Levels’ of Precariousness:

In the chapters that will follow, I examine three different types of undocumented immigrant activism—grassroots coalitions, the New Sanctuary Movement, and immigrant detention center hunger strikes—that denote varying levels of the activist’s precariousness. Each movement offers a differing perspective on the political character of undocumented activism, and each type of undocumented activism correlates with the increasing ‘level’ of precariousness. Moreover, the first two types of undocumented immigrant activism are linked together as they arise as a result of the undocumented’s precariousness. While, in immigrant detention centers

precariousness is one aspect, the complete loss of community, is another. As I will demonstrate, the fact that the undocumented can be rendered completely rightless at any moment, and the minimal access to rights they do have can be undermined with impunity, makes the formation of political networks and coalitions of solidarity an essential aspect of undocumented immigrant activism.

Over the years, politicians have enacted legislation that gives different types of undocumented immigrants certain legal protections, enabling them to work and live in the US under particular conditions. For example, Temporary Protected Status enables the undocumented to reside in the US without risk of detainment or deportation (“Fact Sheet: Temporary Protected Status,” 2021). As we see the emergence of this type of legislation, the public discourse over how to address undocumented immigrants and their rights, or lack thereof, becomes more apparent. Furthermore, we see the actualization of this type of legislation, clearly indicating that granting undocumented immigrants certain legal protections, that could one day even expand, is not without possibility or precedent. In recognizing the type of legislation that does exist to give undocumented immigrants, though temporary and limited in practice, certain legal protections, we then see undocumented immigrants engaging in activism in the public realm. Grassroots coalitions of undocumented immigrants and pro-immigrant citizens work in solidarity, creating political connections to mobilize in neighborhoods, thus giving the undocumented an avenue to claim their rights without the pressing and debilitating fear of immediate deportation.

Other undocumented immigrants however, find themselves at a high risk for deportation, with ICE essentially knocking on their doors. With what seems like no other viable option of safety from deportation, the undocumented take sanctuary. The Sanctuary Movement, as the chapter that follows will demonstrate, enables the non-citizen to circumvent the law, as citizens

gather around them in an act of protection. In order to be eligible for sanctuary, the undocumented must meet a number of different criteria. However, the most important one in denoting this level of precariousness is that they must be going through, or about to go through, a deportation hearing. Given that their rights are essentially about to be taken away, deporting them out of their homes and away from their families, those who take sanctuary out of necessity operate as the second precarious group of undocumented immigrants that I will examine.

In looking at the conditions of precariousness within immigration detention centers, the undocumented in detention find themselves in a restrictive environment where their rights are denied, and in a precarious situation different from those mentioned previously. As non-citizens, detainees have fewer opportunities to express themselves and claim their rights. Although regular citizens do sometimes undertake hunger strikes, these strikes are less frequent because citizens have more ways to have their demands heard and met, such as public nonviolent actions or civil disobedience (Scanlan, Stoll, and Lumm 2008). An undocumented individual is not as constrained as one that is being held in detention, as they may be able to exist in a public space in order to make claims of political belonging. A non-citizen that is being detained, on the other hand, is even more constrained and reduced to bare life. Even though they can be rendered rightless at any moment, detainees choose to act out their political agency in unexpected ways despite finding themselves in an extremely restrictive environment.

Hunger strikes, as a last resort and as a bodily form of resistance, suggest that detainees are put in such precarious and vulnerable conditions that they have nothing left to give but their bodies. Detainees are reduced to bare life, and, as some argue, it is precisely for that reason why they turn to hunger strike and begin politicizing their very bodies (Pfeifer 2018). By putting their bodies and their life on the line to make political claims, what non-citizens are doing as they

engage in hunger strikes is extremely dangerous and, as some argue, their last ditch effort to claim visibility in a state that does not care about their existence. As such, understanding the significance of these actions as a form of activism becomes essential in regard to the broader discussion of how undocumented immigrants claim and realize their rights.

The thesis will proceed as follows: In chapter one, I examine two forms of undocumented political activism: grassroots coalitions and the New Sanctuary Movement. While the undocumented immigrants who engage in grassroots coalitions act publicly because of legal recognitions that grant them a certain level of security to do so, those who take part in the New Sanctuary Movement are at a high risk of deportation and view sanctuary as their only viable option. Therefore, I assert that the undocumented who take sanctuary are in a more precarious situation than those whose activism takes the form of grassroots coalitions. From a Ranciéran perspective, I demonstrate how both movements utilize the common language of the ‘good’ immigrant in appropriating the language of the ‘other’ to enact their equality. However, ‘good’ immigrant discourse has limitations that manifest themselves differently in the two movements, specifically by evoking a notion of immigration deservingness. I argue that the same limitation is present in both forms of undocumented activism, with the New Sanctuary Movement serving as an extreme example of the impurity of democratic politics, in which activists create inequalities even as they are enacting equality.

In chapter 2, I turn to undocumented immigrant detainee hunger strikes. The detained find themselves in an even more precarious situation, given that they are removed from society and lack a political community. I examine two separate biopolitical accounts of detainee hunger strike, which, in different ways, offer important insights into what undocumented migrants are doing when they engage in bodily forms of resistance. Whereas these biopolitical arguments

focus primarily on the starving body, I argue that what is lacking from these accounts is the recognition of the significance of non-citizens forging political networks with individuals both inside and outside of detention. To demonstrate the power of storytelling in permeating the severe isolation of detainment to create a political movement, I provide two case studies of stateless asylum seekers, Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat, who attempted to establish political networks beyond detention through WhatsApp messaging. To conclude, I will highlight the significance of the undocumented's display of democratic action in forging political openings and rendering themselves visible and audible by establishing political networks. I will then offer suggestions for future research on undocumented immigrant activism.

Chapter 1: Immigrant Discourse and The Impurities of Democratic Politics

Growing up in Gwinnett County, Georgia, Jonathan Zuñiga vividly recalls the fear of his undocumented parents engaging in everyday tasks, like driving to the grocery store. In 2009, after Gwinnett County's sheriff's office had joined US Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) 287(g) program, which enables local officers to enforce federal immigration policies, Sheriff Butch Conway began turning hundreds of undocumented immigrants in its custody over to ICE (Vashi, "How Immigrant Communities Beat Back ICE and Helped Flip Georgia"). Many of these arrests and subsequent deportations were executed after having found the undocumented immigrant responsible for committing only minor traffic violations. Zuñiga says his parents, who are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, were forced to abandon their construction jobs for lower-paying factory jobs that required less driving, and therefore, decreased their possibility of being stopped by local law enforcement and being handed over to ICE. Gwinnett County runs one of the largest 287(g) programs in the country, ranking fourth in the nation in 2020 for the number of ICE detainer arrests (Vashi, "How Immigrant Communities Beat Back ICE and Helped Flip Georgia"). Yet, in November 2020, voters in Gwinnett County and nearby Cobb County elected Democratic sheriffs for the first time in years, both of whom made campaign promises to end the 287(g) programs in their respective counties. The sheriff election victories, and the emphasis on 287(g) as a central campaign issue, "resulted in large part from the work of local immigrants' rights organizers who have grown their operations under the Trump presidency and activated communities of color" (Vashi, "How Immigrant Communities Beat Back ICE and Helped Flip Georgia"). Zuñiga, for instance, joined the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) Action Network as a canvasser, focusing on community consciousness around the effects of the 287(g) policy in Gwinnett and Cobb county. By engaging the entire Latinx

community, even the undocumented who were unable to vote, GLAHR successfully created coalitions of solidarity behind the undocumented community, and actualized the power of mobilizing the undocumented community.

In an era of increasingly punitive local and federal policies, mass immigrant detention and mass deportations have many undocumented immigrants, despite their precarity, choosing to engage in strategies of visibility. By speaking out publicly to reclaim their rights, those who lack legal status willingly take the risks associated with residing in the United States “illegally.” As the undocumented attempt to reclaim their stories and their agency, different kinds of political action become available to them. Depending on the contexts of the undocumented—legal status, visibility, community, etc.—they act in differing ways that correlate to their ‘level’ of precarity. As I will demonstrate in the forthcoming pages, activism that transforms undocumented immigrants into legitimate political subjects varies. Some operate through smaller community-based activism, while others gain national publicity by sharing their stories and engaging in civil disobedience against deportation and ICE. To demonstrate the varying levels of precarity, and differing types of activism, this chapter will first examine how undocumented-grassroots coalitions can be mobilized to change the outcome of local elections. Then, I will examine the undocumented who are in a more precarious situation and at high risk for deportation, and therefore opt into taking sanctuary out of necessity.

In this chapter, the first example of grassroots activism makes use of an argument that reinforces the ‘good’ immigrant narrative. This type of discourse can be defined as language that uplifts the undocumented for their positive contributions to their communities, making them deserving of political inclusion. The second example of undocumented activism focuses on the Sanctuary Movement, which also utilizes the ‘good’ immigrant argument in avoiding

deportation, although with a different purpose. In this context, undocumented immigrants, whose only viable option is to take sanctuary, are evidently in a more precarious situation in comparison to those who are able to mobilize publicly throughout their communities. In recognizing how the use of the ‘good’ immigrant narrative manifests itself in different ways, the goal of this chapter is to understand the uses and limitations of this type of language in undocumented immigrant activism. And, in primarily recognizing the undocumented’s entrance to a stage upon which they can enact their equality, they rely on the discourses of the ‘good’ immigrant. This discourse establishes a conception of immigrant deservingness, and may risk the New Sanctuary Movement becoming a case of charity for those who are deemed deserving, rather than non-citizens and citizens acting in solidarity and enabling the undocumented an avenue to reclaim their agency. Therefore, I aim to explore whether we can conceptualize a version of the Sanctuary Movement that does not turn into a case of charity, and does not risk the possibility of rendering non-citizens into victims while taking away their agency.

The chapter will proceed as follows: I will first turn to democratic theorist Jacques Rancière to lay the groundwork in thinking about undocumented immigrant activism as it reveals new ways of thinking about the political agency and the activism of immigrants who lack proper citizenship. Examining Rancière’s concept of subjectivation to underscore the political significance of the undocumented activism brings forth an understanding of how they take the language of ‘the other’ to enact their equality. To put Rancière’s theories into practice, I will then turn to the remarkable grassroots coalitions of undocumented immigrants. The Netflix docuseries *Immigration Nation* provides an important display of the types of discourse non-citizens and citizens alike utilize in making a case for undocumented immigrants in their communities. Given certain legal recognition that enabled them to act in public ways to make claims of equality, the

undocumented community of Charlotte-Mecklenburg effectively tackled a specific piece of legislation, the 287(g) program, and in recognizing the power of the vote despite their inability to participate, successfully elected their sheriff of choice. However, in examining the types of ‘good’ immigrant discourses utilized by the coalitions of both citizens and non-citizens, I recognize that some scholars have acknowledged the contradictory nature of such discourse through the exclusion of “the other,” or undocumented immigrants who do not fit into these ‘good’ characteristics. As it turns out, these coalitions exhibited in *Immigration Nation* are not the only activists making use of the ‘good’ immigrant argument. Rather, undocumented immigrants in an increasingly more precarious situation, and at high risk for deportation, make use of the same language, albeit in more restrictive and pronounced ways. To examine the effects of such discourse more closely, I will turn to the New Sanctuary Movement and its criteria in order to conceptualize the more pronounced effects of ‘good’ immigrant discourse. Drawing on Naomi Paik’s abolitionist perspective of the movement and what she considers to be the two main limitations of the practice of sanctuary, I will focus primarily on the limitation of political framing, which recognizes the paradoxical nature of pro-immigrant discourse. This paradox, as Grace Yukich argues, establishes notions of immigrant deservingness within the Sanctuary Movement. In order to conceptualize the political significance of both movements as a claim to equality, while also recognizing its shortcomings, I argue that since the same ‘good’ argument is present in both forms of activism, they both serve as examples of the impurity of politics. The New Sanctuary Movement, which is more restrictive and offers a more pronounced version of the language of the ‘good’ immigrant, is an extreme example of the impurity of politics, as it more clearly demonstrates the inherent forms of inequalities that form even when creating equality.

Ranciérian Theatrocracy: What does it mean to act politically?

According to democratic theorist Jacques Rancière, politics is to be examined through *dissensus*, which states that politics serves to disrupt and displace “the existing order of the sensible” (Çidam 2021). Rancière’s concept of subjectivation establishes the foundation of his account of dissensual political action, which “refers to the impromptu formation of a political subject through the process of a demonstration of radical equality” (Pribiag 2019, 447). For Rancière, equality is neither a value nor an objective to be reached in the near future, but rather an impending fact that is periodically ‘verified.’ As stated by Rancière, politics “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (Rancière 2004, 30). Such an understanding of democratic politics sets up “the groundwork for his conceptualization of democracy as a theatrical experience” (Çidam 2021). In this chapter, I will first explore the grassroots coalitions of undocumented immigrants and the New Sanctuary Movement as what Rancière considers “a type of theatrical being, temporary and localized” (Rancière as cited in Çidam 2016).

It is important to primarily note that Rancière’s concept of an ‘aesthetic’ sphere “is the place where the categories, classifications, oppositions and hierarchies, which inscribe the forms of domination within the very structures of perception and sensory experience, are first questioned” and thus open up the possibility of a reconfiguration of the political sphere of experience (Rancière 2012, 213-214). With that being said, in looking through a Ranciérian lens of the significance of undocumented immigrant activism, this very act of entering into the political sphere constitutes what he calls the struggle of equality. In other words, undocumented immigrants, through different forms of activism, operate on the presumption of equality in their

demands to be dignified and recognized. In this process of self-emancipation from injustice and oppression, Rancière asserts that it “is not secession, but self-affirmation as a joint-sharer in a common world, with the assumption, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, that one can play the same game as the adversary” (Rancière 2007, 49). In his conceptualization of politics as playing the others’ game, he characterizes undocumented immigrant mobilization as democratic moments, not by success or failure, but rather by their ability “to create a quite new polemical space and to constitute themselves as a political subject” (Çidam 2016).

In playing the others’ game, politics indeed becomes an unexpected moment of those who have been rendered invisible and inaudible, proving their equality in the public realm. In Rancière’s work, he is consistently emphasizing the social order of democracy as “founded upon distinctions of who can speak in the public sphere and who cannot, of who is visible and who is not” (Rockhill and Watts 2009, 6). Politics then becomes the unexpected disruption of the hierarchical social order to declare equality. Or, in the words of Peter Hallward, who emphasises Rancière’s anarchic conception of equality as teatrocratic: “politics is the contingent dramatization of a disruptive equality, the unauthorized and impromptu improvisation of a democratic voice” (2009, 142). Therefore, it is helpful to look at undocumented immigrant activism through the lens of Ranciérian politics, and in terms of its teatrocratic qualities.

As we will see throughout this chapter, non-citizen activists attempt to behave in ways that actualize a power they did not already have. By utilizing a common language, frequently the ‘good’ immigrant rhetoric, it gives the otherwise invisible and inaudible experiences of the undocumented the ability to be recognized as legitimate speaking subjects, thus making these events politically significant. As grassroots coalitions led by non-citizens, the community mobilization against the anti-immigrant policy 287(g) and ICE reveals new ways of thinking

about the political agency and status of immigrants who lack proper citizenship, but act in political ways nonetheless. I will first examine their democratic action as a theatrical experience, in which the undocumented have adopted the language of “the other” to become political actors, establishing a political stage upon which they enact their equality. I suggest that it is the appropriation of the language of others, namely ‘good’ immigrant discourse, that enables the undocumented to subvert dominant conceptualizations of citizenship and belonging, and, in doing so, pressure ICE, and more specifically, local municipalities, to exercise legal discretion and stop arbitrary deportations.

The Power of Undocumented Mobilization: Rendering the Invisible, Visible

Despite the precarious condition of undocumented immigrants, they still manage to act politically in unexpected and improper ways that disrupt the existing political order, and, in doing so, often work alongside communities of pro-immigrant citizen activists. Immigrants have used direct action such as public demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins to demand legislative or executive action on immigration reform (Ataç et al. 2016; Tyler and Marciniak 2013). More recently, many immigrants are becoming ‘active citizens’ and making their voices heard in electoral politics (Varsanyi 2005). However, “while an increasing number of immigrants are being politically mobilized, a substantial proportion of these newly mobilized Americans are ‘illegal’ or undocumented... [and] they will never be able to cast votes in formal elections (Varsanyi 2005, 776). Yet, the political nature of these collective acts should not be overlooked. Rather, these immigrants, many with the inability to vote, have enacted a form of citizenship through active, public political engagement with their local communities and have mobilized to make use of existing institutional mechanisms, such as the power of the vote, to make their

voices heard. Leading up to the 2020 November election, coalitions of both citizens and non-citizens such as the Georgia Latino Alliance For Human Rights (GLAHR) Action Network and Charlotte, North Carolina's Comunidad Colectiva focused on local sheriff races and resorted to educating their communities on problematic policies their local municipalities support ("How Immigrant Communities Beat Back ICE and Helped Flip Georgia"). To examine the ways in which those who lack formal citizenship attempt to forge political openings and mobilize in ways that make themselves both visible and audible by publicly articulating certain claims, I will turn to Comunidad Colectiva as a case of undocumented community mobilization against the 287g program and ICE, highlighting the significance in the undocumented's courageous display of political activism.

Without citizenship and an intense fear of deportation, many undocumented communities choose to remain silent. Others, however, have decided to join coalitions assembled by citizen and non-citizen immigrant rights advocates who push policies for "the voice of the immigrant" (*Immigration Nation* 2020). Comunidad Colectiva, for example, is a grassroots organization, predominantly led by undocumented immigrant women of color, established in 2016 "in response to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election and the xenophobic policies of the Trump administration" ("Comunidad Colectiva: About Us"). The 2020 Netflix documentary *Immigration Nation* features Stefania Artega, the co-founder of Colectiva, and her efforts against 287g and ICE enforcement in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, working to collectively advance progressive local policies to protect the immigrant community from arbitrary arrests and deportations. *Immigration Nation* offers a candid and shocking reality of immigration enforcement in the United States under the Trump administration, and presents a brutally honest depiction of a broken system that is built upon policies of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Episode 3,

entitled “The Power of the Vote,” reveals the partnerships between federal ICE officials and local municipalities to place the undocumented in detention, and subsequently through deportation procedures under the 287(g) program. The 287(g) program, which deputizes local police, essentially turning them into ICE-like officers, was enacted under the Bush administration, whose policies attempted to wither “the distinction between federal and local law enforcement, thereby expanding the manpower to capture immigrants (Paik 2017, 11). Artega underscores the choice to mobilize behind Comunidad Colectiva’s grassroots efforts, and the significant choice to focus on a specific piece of legislation they found to be negatively impacting their communities:

We decided we had to do something. We couldn’t stay still. We took a moment to realize what [we should] really focus on and what is at stake. And we noticed that the 287(g) program was something that was here locally, and we had [the] power to do something about [it], especially because we knew the elections were coming up. (*Immigration Nation* 2020)

Thus, undocumented activists, like Artega, have recognized the power of the vote, and have mobilized coalitions of non-citizens to motivate those who can vote, to vote for issues that will affect undocumented individuals like herself.

Some undocumented individuals, such as Artega’s immediate and extended family, had been protected against deportation under what is called Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS is granted by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security “to eligible foreign-born individuals who are unable to return home safely due to conditions or circumstances preventing their country from adequately handling the return” (“Fact Sheet: Temporary Protected Status,” 2021). During a designated period, TPS holders are “not removable from the U.S. and not detainable by DHS on the basis of his or her immigration status” (“Fact Sheet: Temporary Protected Status,” 2021). As the episode of *Immigration Nation* goes on to explain, Trump had just recently rescinded TPS for Salvadorans, leaving thousands of family situations to be placed

in a state of limbo. This only further serves to demonstrate the precarious nature of undocumented immigrants, whose legal recognition could be rescinded at any given moment, stripping them of any sense of security and safety from deportation proceedings. While Artega recognizes that her family will, one day, be at risk for deportation, the legal recognition Artega was able to operate under gave her the opportunity and security to mobilize openly and publicly.

The docuseries, and this particular episode, focuses on two primary pro-immigrant arguments: one, arguing against the increasing criminalization of the undocumented, and, two, the immoral and wrongful separation of families as a result of immigration enforcement and deportations. Both non-citizens and citizens alike utilized this language to fight against the election of Irwin Carmichael, who had been the sitting sheriff of Charlotte-Mecklenburg at the time, and who actively supported the 287(g) program. At a 287(g) steering committee held by ICE officers and municipal officials in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, one local citizen employed the criminalization argument, highlighting the expanded meaning of immigrant “criminal offenses” being put into use by ICE officers to arrest and deport more undocumented immigrants. She argued that when ICE officials and other anti-immigrant forces label undocumented immigrants as criminals, most people immediately think of major crimes, such as murders or drug deals, not the minor offenses, such as a broken taillight, that most undocumented individuals are placed into custody for violating (*Immigration Nation* 2020). By evoking the ‘good’ immigrant argument, where not all deportations are the result of gross law violations that warrant such aggressive action, the citizen actively counters the misconceptions and stereotypes of undocumented immigrants as criminals. Similarly, Artega herself, as a non-citizen, utilizes the same type of language when she narrates her experiences growing up as an undocumented

immigrant in the United States. As the camera focuses in on Artega's undergraduate diploma, she recalls her mother constantly reminding her to do everything right in order to avoid deportation:

Ever since I could remember my parents instilled in me that just one screw up, one tiny little thing can land you right back to El Salvador. You have to be twice as good. Literally. It just takes one mistake to boot us out... (*Immigration Nation* 2020)

Artega and the directors attempt to employ the 'good' immigrant trope, albeit in a different way than the citizen at the 287(g) steering committee, reminding the audience that she and her family are good people and contribute positively to their community, and thus deserving of residency and citizenship.

Moreover, Meghan Conley, a citizen of Knox County and professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee who writes on immigration politics and policies, utilizes the second previously mentioned pro-immigrant argument by highlighting the wrongful separation of families to advocate against the 287(g) program. In speaking directly to ICE officials, she questions: How do you continue to justify Knox County's participation in 287(g) knowing that it leads to the separation of families in our community predominantly through arrests for minor offenses? Once again, Artega utilizes a similar language as she recalls in an interview the emotional toll she had endured growing up surrounded by families that were being separated by ICE officials in her neighborhood:

A lot of my friends who I grew up with lost family members due to 287(g). There was lots of ICE activity in our city. I was the only person with a driver's license in my neighborhood that could go pick up people who had their children who were stuck at an ID check. So, I was there and got to witness people with their families on a two-way road getting put into sheriff's office vans. I was given people's cars with their children and told, "please take them home." So I saw the risk and the fear. (*Immigration Nation* 2020)

Here, Artega focuses on the ever-looming threat of the separation of families through deportation. As aforementioned, the trauma of familial separations are used by both non-citizen

and citizen immigrant rights activists in insisting on the importance of offering a counter-narrative from the unauthorized immigrant's point of view, evoking sentiments of empathy to hopefully transform the future of immigration policy.

To once again draw on the theories of Rancière to understand the political significance of the practices of ordinary undocumented immigrants who actively created these democratic events, Artega and her colleagues of Comunidad Colectiva verified their equality in making themselves both visible and audible, and “to do so, they imitate others, expropriate their language and, in acting ways other than expected of them, challenge the current distribution of the sensible and highlight its contingency” (Çidam 2021, 137-138). As exemplified through the types of discourses evoked by non-citizen and citizen activists alike in *Immigration Nation*, it is evident that “in order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized” (Rancière & Panagia 2000, 116). In order for their message to be audible and received by those whom they are trying to reach, they must use a common language. Undocumented immigrant mobilization then becomes a theatrical performance of political subjects “who build an artificial stage to enact their equality by re-presenting themselves through the appropriation of the language of others” (Çidam 2016). Therefore, in playing the others game and appropriating the language of “the other,” undocumented immigrants are able to reconfigure notions of belonging and expand our understanding of political action as available to those who exist outside of the bounds of citizenship.

This form of mobilization constitutes significant political action insofar as it allows “certain subjects that do not count [to] create a common polemical scene where they put into contention the objective status of what is ‘given’ and impose an examination and discussion of

those things that were not ‘visible,’ that were not accounted for previously” (Ranciére & Panagia 2000, 125). In this case, what is given is the discourse of the ‘good’ immigrant, which the undocumented utilized in their breakthrough into the political arena to render themselves visible and equal in their quest to challenge an existing law. The grassroots coalition Comunidad Colectiva recognized the immigrant discourse already in existence, and used that “to imitate others, expropriate their language and in doing so challenge the existing order” in a theatrical display of a common language (Çidam 2016). According to Ranciére, then, echoing and confiscating the words already in use (i.e. immorality of familial separations) enabled the undocumented community of Charlotte-Mecklenberg to break into the political realm.

Furhtermore, the work of Comunidad Colectiva accentuates the role that political coalitions and networks play in the staging of equality, enabling the undocumented to enact a form of citizenship to influence local elections. These undocumented individuals, who have some sort of legal recognition that enables them to act in a particularly public manner, are therefore, in a less precarious situation compared to other deportable immigrants. Perhaps for those reasons, they don’t find it necessary to only draw on the ‘good’ immigrant narrative, enabling them to also depend on other arguments that are not as rigid, as well as strong networks of solidarity between citizens and non-citizens. As exemplified in “The Power of the Vote” and Comunidad Colectiva’s canvassing efforts, they were able to make residents aware of, not only 287(g) as a policy, but also how to change it. By establishing networks with Charlotte-Mecklenburg citizens, Artega and her colleagues worked to make them aware that voting for a specific sheriff candidate could actually change that policy. By prioritizing building the political consciousness of the community to the effects of 287(g), Comunidad Colectiva was able to move beyond just the discourse of the ‘good’ immigrant to make their claims of equality.

Rather, one scene demonstrated a simple conversation between Artega and a citizen of Charlotte-Mecklenburg in highlighting what 287(g) means in their community. Instead of making use of the ‘good’ immigrant, Artega explains the piece of legislation rather matter-of-factly, and underscores the necessity of voting to change this policy.

However, some scholars have argued that ‘good’ immigrant rhetoric is problematic for undocumented immigrants and citizen pro-immigrant activists when claiming their rights (Honig 2001; Paik 2017; Yukich 2013). Yet, Comunidad Colectiva and other non-citizen activists are not the only ones evoking this type of ‘good’ immigrant language in order to claim their rights. To further develop this argument, I will turn to the US Sanctuary Movement, where the undocumented do not have legal protection and are going through deportation proceedings, and therefore, their precarious conditions are stricter and their possibility for political action is a lot narrower. Additionally, in examining the New Sanctuary Movement (NSM), I will offer a more nuanced approach to the discourse of the ‘good’ immigrant, that becomes even more pronounced and attains a more restrictive quality in sanctuary because of its association with religion and its ‘charitable’ character, known primarily for protecting undocumented immigrants from deportation proceedings. As the NSM more clearly establishes distinctions between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrant, thus creating a culture of immigrant deservingness due to the criteria needed in order to be considered for sanctuary, I will turn to the movement in order to assess what scholars have considered the “impurity of politics” and the ways in which political action, as understood by Jacques Rancière, creates its own inequalities even as it is establishing equality (Çidam 2021).

The US New Sanctuary Movement

In 2018, after fourteen years of living and working legally in the United States and raising their seven children, Oneita and Clive Thompson received alarming news from the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement: they had only four days to pack up their belongings and leave the country. They had immigrated in 2004, fleeing gang violence in Jamaica, seeking asylum in the US. Their application for asylum was subsequently denied, however, they were granted permission in one-year increments to stay. They settled in Cedarville, New Jersey, where Clive worked as a heavy machine operator, and Oneita worked as a nursing assistant. As the Trump administration cracked down on immigration and they faced the harsh reality of deportation, the life they had built in New Jersey was suddenly at risk. Returning to Jamaica was not an option for the Thompsons, as it would mean having to separate from their children and re-expose themselves to the violence. Exhausting all other avenues to stay in the country, Oneita contacted Peter Pedemonti, co-director of the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, who presented the Thompsons with what felt like their only viable option: seeking sanctuary in a church. For decades, families have lived in churches as an act of resistance against deportation and to buy time to build up legal cases to persuade immigration officials to allow them to remain in the United States (Tompkins 2020). For almost two and a half years, the Thompsons took sanctuary in two Philadelphia churches to escape ICE and deportation back to their home country of Jamaica (Tompkins 2020). While Mr. and Mrs. Thompson said goodbye to the outside world, their two children were both U.S. citizens, and were free to come and go. Inside the church, the couple spent their days praying and trying to remain optimistic despite the severe isolation. They attempted to build political networks with those outside of the church, emailing Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, Senator Bob Casey of

Pennsylvania, and Representative Dwight Evens of Pennsylvania, all of whom visited the church in an act of solidarity to support the family's cause (Tompkins 2020). Simultaneously, immigration rights activists and sanctuary supporters remained dedicated to the family's case, holding protests and vigils outside ICE headquarters. In an attempt to strengthen social relations with outsiders, Oneita cooked an authentic Jamaican dinner every month, bringing the church community together. After more than two years of confinement in the church, the couple got word that their eldest daughter, who was a U.S. citizen, was allowed to submit a "petition for an alien relative," giving her parents the ability to stay in the country legally (Tompkins 2020). After 843 days of successfully taking sanctuary, the Thompson's were able to walk free (Tompkins 2020).

The New Sanctuary Movement (NSM) is a faith-based social movement, in which churches and congregations in the United States give 'sanctuary' to undocumented immigrants at risk of deportation (Caminero-Santangelo 2012). The concept of 'sanctuary' has its origins in religious philosophy as well as through histories of resistance against state injustices. The term itself "indicates a site of refuge where the authority of God prevails over the authority of the government" (Paik 2017, 6). The principles of sanctuary have a long history, but the practice became especially widespread in the United States during the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, in which faith communities provided temporary 'refuge' to Central American migrants fleeing civil wars and gross human rights violations (Paik 2017). In the 1980s, most sanctuary recipients were recent arrivals who, in fleeing violence, entered the United States in need of immediate humanitarian aid more than residency or citizenship (Yukich 2012). The movement has since been revived and remodeled as the New Sanctuary Movement, launched publicly in May 2007 as a response to the escalating deportations of undocumented immigrants (Caminero-Santangelo

2012; Paik 2017). The NSM was only a relatively small part of the larger immigrant rights mobilizations that occurred in the United States during the late 2000s (Yukich 2013). By the end of the year, congregations in approximately 50 cities were involved with the movement or expressing interest (Caminero-Santangelo 2012). The NSM “encompasses a coalition of religious congregations, local jurisdictions, educational institutions, and even restaurants, that commit to supporting immigrants, regardless of status.” (Paik 2017, 5). In contrast to the 1980s movement, the NSM “highlights the struggles of immigrants who are long-term US residents with local family and community ties, careers and homes,” as we saw in the case of Oneita and Clive Thompson (Yukich 2012, 107). In taking sanctuary under the contexts of the NSM, undocumented immigrants are seeking legalization and naturalization that will allow them to continue living and working in the U.S. (Yukich 2012).

As with the 1980s movement, the NSM emerges from congregations that have provided shelter and direct aid to immigrants under threat of deportation, as well as local jurisdictions who have passed sanctuary policies limiting cooperation with ICE in tracking down and deporting undocumented immigrants (Paik 2017). As ICE largely depends on the assistance of local authorities to both identify and hold undocumented immigrants that warrant deportation, the

dependence on non-federal assistance also means that localities’ refusal to collaborate with ICE can blunt the force of its deportation regime. This is the central force and logic driving the sanctuary movement among the cities, counties, and states that have passed policies affirming their commitment to immigrants and non-cooperation with ICE. (Paik 2017, 8)

These local sanctuary policies range from refusing to detain immigrants on ICE’s behalf, limiting the use of the local police force to support federal immigration laws, refusing to lease jail beds for the purpose of immigration detention or allowing ICE officers access to local jails (Paik 2017). Additionally, sanctuary policies can restrict use of local resources for immigration

enforcement, and further prohibit local government agencies from inquiring about immigration status (Paik 2017). Many scholars agree that the non-cooperation of local municipalities has provided necessary protections for the immigrant communities who have been affected by the escalating criminalization of a wide range of targeted populations (Paik 2017).

Recipients of sanctuary are carefully selected to closely align with the religious influences of the movement, appealing to both humanitarianism and moral sensitivity. In order to be eligible for sanctuary, immigrants have to be in danger of going through deportation proceedings, have to be a part of families with citizen children, have good work records, no criminal background (including minor offenses), and must have some possibility of winning their immigration case under existing laws (Yukich 2013; Freeland 2010). The NSM places great emphasis on family value, so that if the law were enforced, the family would be split up (Yukich 2012, 113). Selected families are encouraged to ‘go public,’ representing themselves through first-person narratives depicting the “trauma of unauthorized existence, familial separations, and living in fear of deportation,” primarily to draw attention to the injustices of current immigration policy (Caminero-Santangelo 2012, 93; Yukich 2012). Thus, ‘sanctuary’ under the NSM has become “reconfigured as a public and performative practice, meant to offer a potential counter-discourse to dominant rhetoric on immigration and to constitute an activist community of faith” (Caminero-Santangelo 2012, 92). I will explore the role of religious and family-oriented rhetoric more in-depth later in this chapter through my discussion on the ways in which the Sanctuary Movement perpetuates distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants, problematically establishing notions of immigrant deservingness. By having conservative and meticulous criteria, the representations of the immigrant set forth by the Sanctuary Movement work both within and against the U.S. immigration system’s own discourses of deservingness

and seek to expose ICE's discretionary systems of detainment and deportation. In primarily recognizing the Sanctuary Movement as a necessary entity, protecting undocumented communities and serving as a "conduit for mobilization and articulation of the demands of activists whose ultimate objective is comprehensive immigration reform," I will also turn to an abolitionist perspective of the movement to underscore its limits and contradictions (Freeland 2010). In turning to Paik, I will take a closer look at the paradox of liberal sanctuary, where pro-immigrant efforts risk rendering migrants figuratively voiceless and excluded from the conceptualizations of the nation, even as they advocate for legal inclusion.

An Abolitionist Perspective of the Sanctuary Movement

In her article entitled "Abolitionist Futures and the US Sanctuary Movement," Paik writes following the election of Donald Trump and his aggressive changes to immigration policy during his first month in office: an attempt to ban all refugees, documented visitors, temporary and permanent residents from seven primarily Muslim countries, to arrest and deport roughly 11 million undocumented migrants estimated to be residing in the United States among other anti-immigrant policies and executive orders (2017). Many scholars have suggested that the sweeping immigration enforcement policies augmented under the Trump Administration may have triggered a renewed commitment to the practices and principles of sanctuary (Paik 2017). Therefore, with increasingly harsh anti-immigration policies being introduced and sustained throughout his presidency and afterward, "sanctuary provides a ground floor for survival and a strategy of resistance against the violence mobilized against targeted populations like immigrants" (Paik 2017, 5). Even in recognizing that sanctuary is a necessary practice for the undocumented in extremely precarious positions, risking the real threat of deportation, Paik

simultaneously recognizes two main limitations that exist inherently within the approaches to sanctuary—one of historical analysis and the other of political framing:

The first limitation emerges from an interpretation of history that obscures the neoliberal foundations that have paved the way for the criminalization of targeted peoples—including those of color, immigrants, and Arab and Muslim people. Furthermore, the sanctuary movement has functioned within a liberal democratic framework that not only confines its potential intervention, but can also lead it to reproduce the very exclusions it seeks to challenge. (2017, 5)

In examining immigration enforcement policies that target specific groups of people and the limitations of sanctuary, Paik argues that the movement must adopt an abolitionist framework that not only aids targeted populations, but also combats the structures through which they become targeted (2017).

In order to substantiate her abolitionist perspective from a historical analysis, Paik underscores the ways in which the very meaning of ‘sanctuary’ has been adapted and modified over time as a result of the specific location, conditions, and contexts targeting marginalized populations. To do so, she provides historical examples of sanctuary, beginning with the Underground Railroad as a form of resistance against the Fugitive Slave Act. She then turns to the sanctuary movement of the 1980s and, subsequently, its revival in the 2000s. In an examination of the 1980s sanctuary movement, she provides the historical background behind the masses of Central Americans fleeing their home countries for asylum in the United States. She recounts the Dirty Wars of El Salvador and Guatemala, which quickly transformed into proxy battlegrounds of the Cold War. During this time, the United States supported military governments in both Central American countries that facilitated the suppression of leftist and indigenous opposition movements, ultimately killing more than 75,000 Salvadorans and 200,000 Guatemalans (Paik 2017). While Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees attempted to flee the U.S.

fostered violence and other gross human rights violations, the United States refused to recognize them as such, instead deeming them ‘economic migrants.’ As Paik and other scholars suggest, it was precisely this unjust practice that sparked sanctuary activists and hundreds of congregations to provide shelter, food, legal aid, and medical care to the undocumented Central American immigrants (2017).

Paik then highlights laws that were enacted to criminalize the sanctuary movement, and to further criminalize the presence of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Namely, laws like the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) have drastically expanded grounds for arresting and deporting undocumented individuals. In revealing the histories of the sanctuary movement, Paik emphasizes that the criminalization of immigrants is not a new phenomenon that materialized under the Trump Administration. Rather, the criminalization of migrants and other marginalized populations has existed throughout the history of the United States, and has only intensified and proved itself malleable under differing administrations and contexts (Paik 2017). Therefore, Paik contends that this history of oppressive policies has only served to enable the criminalization of targeted communities, and one that continuously reinforces the need for sanctuary activists and practices.

While the historical contexts behind the direct governmental attacks against marginalized communities is important for understanding the necessity of sanctuary practices as a resistance against state injustices, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus more precisely on what she asserts as the second limitation of sanctuary practices: one of political framing. To elaborate on this point, she suggests that:

Many existing sanctuary policies operate within the framework of liberal democracy and law, even of law and order, conveying that immigrants should be included in our communities, but implicitly conceding that their membership is provisional. By selecting certain immigrants or carving out exceptions, religious congregations and local governments play into a dichotomy that valorizes ‘good immigrants’ against unspoken ‘bad immigrants,’ who do not deserve protection. Such liberal versions of sanctuary challenge the US state’s exclusions, but only to expand the terms of inclusion, rather than to disrupt their logic altogether. (Paik 2017, 16)

In order to be eligible for sanctuary, the criteria that must be met by the undocumented immigrant usually serves to protect those who actively perform the role of the ‘good immigrant.’ As stated earlier in this chapter, those chosen for sanctuary must be facing a deportation order, have children that are US citizens, no criminal record, a ‘good work record,’ and a ‘viable case under current law’ (Paik 2017). So while the NSM has expanded its criteria to encompass anyone facing a deportation order, it “selects immigrants whose legal cases clearly reveal the contradictions and moral injustice of our current immigration system,” thereby exposing US immigration policy failures (Paik 2017, 14). Consequently, Paik reveals that though many immigrants and those advocating for their protection do so by asserting that they are not criminals, they simultaneously reaffirm the legitimacy of criminalization, even while demanding an exception to it (2017). Thus, Paik indicates that the core paradox of liberal sanctuary exists insofar as “being a law-abiding, ‘good’ immigrant will not save you as long as the state can determine what it means to be a law-abiding, ‘good’ immigrant” (Paik 2017, 16). In order to better understand this core paradox of liberal sanctuary politics, I will turn to Grace Yukich to further conceptualize the role sanctuary plays in facilitating conceptions of the model immigrant and immigrant deservingness.

Immigrant Deservingness

Numerous scholars have written on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrant discourse and have raised concerns about evoking such arguments to inevitably denote human value (Yukich 2013; Honig 2001). Bonnie Honig, for instance, explores the double edged sword of foreignness, what she calls the “givers” or the “takers” from the nation-state (2001, 99). On the one hand, “foreignness is generally taken to signify a threat of corruption that must be kept out or contained for the sake of the stability and identity of the regime” (Honig 2001, 1-2). On the other hand, post-nationalists differ from this claim only insofar as their valuation of it is contrasting. Instead, “they celebrate it and valorize the very fragmentation that earlier political theorists took to be a problem” (Honig 2001, 2). Consequently, despite the seemingly contrasting arguments, they ultimately denote two sides of the same coin. This is problematic because both the notion of the good immigrant and the bad immigrant can be used simultaneously in denoting their value. Moreover, ‘good’ immigrant discourse used under the New Sanctuary Movement becomes even more restrictive due to its association with religious organizations and the extremely public platform in which those selected for sanctuary are expected to speak on in telling their stories. Sanctuary activists try to present sanctuary recipients as positive assets to our communities and therefore families that embody not only ‘good’ immigrant perceptions, but also religious high ground. Therefore, distinctions of deservingness arise “based on cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic differences rather than legal status, since they were focused on undocumented immigrants as a group” (Yukich 2013, 309). In doing so, they imply that undocumented individuals that may symbolize false perceptions of the ‘bad’ immigrant are subsequently undeserving of inclusion and protection. Utilizing Grace Yukich’s article entitled “Constructing the Model Immigrant: Movement Strategy and Immigrant Deservingness in the New Sanctuary Movement,” I will

further examine the ways in which the Sanctuary Movement may prove to be problematic, as Paik suggests, by taking a closer look at how the movement's criteria generates images of the model immigrant, and therefore, is utilized to establish distinctions of deservingness (2013).

In drawing on ethnographic and interviewing data on the New Sanctuary Movement primarily in the New York City and Los Angeles coalitions, Yukich assesses what she deems the model movement strategy: "the practice of lifting up 'model' members of a group to transform negative stereotypes associated with the group as a whole" (2013, 303). By generating distinctions between model immigrants and those who do not share those same 'good' characteristics, New Sanctuary activists implicitly deemed many undocumented immigrants as undeserving of the right to legal acknowledgement, residency, and citizenship:

The model minority stereotype constructs distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" racial groups in the United States by highlighting "models" who embrace dominant American values such as hard work and self-reliance (e.g., Asian Americans) and distinguishing them from those who are unfairly and inaccurately perceived as rejecting those values (e.g., Latinos and African Americans). (Yukich 2013, 303)

As aforementioned, by carefully selecting certain families that help to challenge negative cultural stereotypes often associated with undocumented immigrants, "and using them as public representatives of people deserving of legal residency and citizenship, New Sanctuary activists unwittingly drew a line between immigrants who were similar to these 'models' and those who were different" (Yukich 2013, 310). When the NSM attempted to rearrange itself to better adapt to current political and religious contexts of the 2000s, and by broadening sanctuary to be more than just offering a space of refuge to undocumented immigrants, they "envisioned it as partnership, accompaniment, and advocacy with and for immigrants" (Yukich 2013, 310). To advocate for immigration policy reform and in an attempt to shift debates from sentiments of animosity to empathy and solidarity, "they decided the best strategy for doing this was to

carefully select undocumented immigrants whose histories and cases clearly challenged negative cultural stereotypes” (Yukich 2013, 310). Therefore, activists reframed undocumented immigrants as “positive contributors to the national community rather than as threats to its well-being,” as this quote from the movement’s website illustrates:

Leaders and sectors that recognize the valuable contributions of immigrants, the importance of respecting their human rights and the complex dynamics of immigration, need to communicate their insights effectively and broadly. The general public needs to see immigrant workers and their families with new eyes . . . Faith leaders can change the terms of the debate and create the conditions for comprehensive immigration reform. (New Sanctuary Movement 2007 as cited in Yukich 2013)

To recall the case of the Thompson family who took sanctuary in a Philadelphia church, their narrative of hard-working parents, who called attention to the necessity of keeping their family together in the US, marked their deservingness of taking sanctuary. Their case also received an enormous amount of publicity from both politicians and pro-immigrant activists advocating on their behalf. Accordingly, they were strategically chosen because they embodied the ‘good’ immigrant discourse, indicating that they were worthy of the legalization and naturalization that would permit them to continue living and working in the US alongside their children.

Many scholars have argued that the NSM has been less about physical sanctuary than about providing a new means of telling the story of the dehumanizing effects of the current US deportation policy (Caminero-Santangelo 2012). Gregory Freeland, for example, underscores the importance of the NSM’s story-based approach, in which the testimonies of the recipients of sanctuary “operate as frames to foster collective identity,” which is a crucial component of maintaining political mobilization (Freeland 2010, 492). One of the most central religio-political discourses implemented by the movement is an emphasis on family values and putting an end to family separations. Sanctuary campaigns heavily draw upon the religious authority of the church

and the theological paradigms that view the family as a sacred entity and therefore deserving of protection. Since the family is considered sacred in many religions, the splitting up of the family due to deportation orders, a practice the US has been widely criticized for exercising, has become a key concern among NSM activists and supporters (Freeland 2010). In framing their mobilization strategy, NSM has repeatedly employed the expression “keep the family together” (Freeland 2010). As Caminero-Santangelo notes, “the statement on the website of the NSM, ‘When we see families in need or danger, we are called by our faith to respond’, foregrounds the imperative of family preservation, thus tapping into the ‘family values’ rhetoric that has featured as a conservative slogan” (2012, 97). While Freeland asserts that the “focus on the family establishes an effective frame because it is an issue that crosses cultural, political and social lines in ways that strengthens the collective of NSM activities and those they support (2010, 492), it simultaneously seeks to exclude many undocumented immigrants, since a religious depiction of the family “typically stresses the sanctity of the heterosexual, nuclear family as central to the well-being of both organized religion and personal spirituality” (Yukich 2013, 309). To once again draw on the Thompsons’ case of sanctuary, their central justification was that if deported, they would inevitably be separated from their children who held legal recognition as citizens in the US.

While, overtime, New Sanctuary activists have increasingly attempted to avoid language of victimhood, early sanctuary activists frequently referred to undocumented immigrants at risk for deportation as “victims of the system” (Yukich 2013). Since immigrants are often stereotyped as criminals and considered dangerous to the safety and well-being of the country, reframing them as victims of injustice was a tactic used to challenge the overwhelming use of negative stereotypes. However, as Yukich and other critics of victimhood discourse have pointed out,

“framing immigrants as victims also unintentionally depicts them as helpless, dependent people in need of charity” (2013, 310). Now, citizen activists rely more on a story-based approach, in which undocumented immigrant narratives illustrate that they are not powerless people in need of charity:

Building on the biblical tradition of prophecy as a call to return to God, New Sanctuary activists asserted that undocumented immigrants were prophets empowered by God to tell stories about the injustices they had experienced so that people’s lives (and policies) would change. (Yukich 2013, 313)

Thus, the movement reconstructs the undocumented immigrant as “powerful people by virtue of their stories and the potential of those stories to reveal hidden truths” of the broken US immigration system (Yukich 2013, 313). In the next section, I will underscore the ways in which these personal narratives, specifically those that reinforce notions of the ‘good’ immigrant and family values, serve as the appropriation of the language of “the other,” enabling undocumented immigrants to be recognized and heard within the political sphere they are otherwise excluded from.

Yukich would agree with Paik’s assertion that “liberal sanctuary shores up the notion that undocumented immigrants deserve inclusion in the community, but contingent on their submission to the capitalist extraction of their labour and to the state’s (racialized) criminal justice apparatuses” (Paik 2017, 16). By uplifting ‘good’ undocumented immigrant voices and drawing a distinction between immigrants deserving of protection and legal recognition to those who are undeserving, sanctuary activists construct harmful divisions between immigrants. Yukich and Paik both offer excellent accounts of the contradictions and inequalities of the sanctuary movement, which should not be overlooked. However, while I agree that reliance on ‘good’ immigrant discourse and notions of immigrant deservingness risks the NSM becoming a case of charity rather than an act of solidarity, and thus, limiting the enactment of the

undocumented immigrant's full political inclusion, I suggest that it is precisely, in Ranciérian terms, the theatrical component of politics and the appropriation of the 'good' immigrant discourse that provides the undocumented an avenue into the political realm to claim their rights. Similarly to the undocumented activists in Charlotte and Georgia who took the words of "the other" in order to be heard, albeit in a different way, sanctuary recipients also take the language of the 'good' immigrant that is already in use by those in a position to offer sanctuary, allowing them to generate an unexpected yet powerful platform on which they were able to speak themselves into political visibility. And, while this type of 'good' immigrant discourse undoubtedly creates distinctions of deservingness, it is possible that the appropriation of this language is the only avenue for undocumented immigrants, who are in an extremely precarious situation and at high risk for deportation, to make themselves visible and audible when they were not before. Moreover, in recognizing that this kind of language risks the possibility of making others invisible, I argue that this is still a claim to equality, but that it is not pure and creates its own inequalities. To further consider this possibility, I will present the New Sanctuary Movement as an extreme example of what scholars consider to be the impurity of democratic politics.

The Impurity of Democratic Politics

As Yukich and Paik accurately call attention to, the criteria of the NSM reinforces distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants, suggesting that public support is principally granted to certain stories, religions, identities, and experiences, thus deeming only a small fraction of undocumented immigrants worthy of political recognition and citizen solidarity. These families are given a platform to speak about the injustices they have faced as a result of US immigration policies, "becoming public spokespeople for immigration rights by telling their

personal stories in a compelling way” (Caminero-Santangelo 2012, 93). As

Caminero-Santangelo highlights,

The NSM has sought to maximize the potential of faith-based support networks, providing simultaneously both a ‘haven’ from, and a ‘bridge’ to, the larger public. It is by seeking sanctuary (by becoming ‘refugees’, in the most literal and fundamental sense of taking refuge) that undocumented immigrants gained access to a media voice. (2012, 101)

From a Ranciérian perspective, perhaps this ‘bridge’ that is generated through sanctuary and the appropriation of ‘good’ immigrant discourse exemplifies the emancipatory performance of democracy, where the undocumented immigrant is given the opportunity to reconfigure the given social arrangement “by means of which a part of those who [have] no part begins to be seen or heard” (Pribrag 2019, 449). In conversation with Rancière, I suggest that the discourse utilized by sanctuary recipients enables them to become political actors, by appropriating the language of others, namely the ‘good’ immigrant trope, and thus challenging the existing ordering and conceptions of the citizen. However, in taking into account both Yukich and Paik’s criticisms of the New Sanctuary Movement and democratic theorists’ conceptions of the problematic aspects of Rancière’s thinking, it is evident that through the appropriation of the language of “the other,” sanctuary recipients and other pro-immigrant activists who evoke ‘good’ immigrant discourse and notions of immigrant deservingness implicitly make the exclusion of the other possible.

As Çiğdem Çidam points out in her book entitled, *In the Street: Democratic Action, Theatricality, and Political Friendship*,

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of Rancière’s works is their ability to help us come to terms with the unsettling fact that every order— even the ones that claim to be based on the most egalitarian principles—creates its own distribution of the sensible and, along with that distribution, its own exclusions the moment it participates in the allocation of roles and functions on the basis of capacities... What is problematic is that, in his effort to retain the sharp distinction that he draws between the logic of the police order and that of politics, Rancière seems to lose sight of how, in certain cases—as in the

case of a strike, demonstration, or rebellion—the activity of making visible what had no business being seen, of transforming what used to be heard as mere noise into a discourse, requires those who have no part in the existing order to do those very things that he considers constitutive of the police. (2021, 145)

In other words, pro-immigrant rhetoric “can still be regarded as an attempt to intervene in public discourse and to change the direction of that discourse, by appealing to, and in the process at times constructing, an activist community of faith” (Caminero-Santangelo 2012, 101). However, the inequalities this discourse generates in its wake should not be overlooked. Consequently, undocumented activism, and the NSM in particular, should be examined through a lens that acknowledges democratic politics as “messy and impure,” rather than taking an abolitionist perspective and holding contempt over the impurities (Çidam 2021).

While these exclusions that are created through immigrant claims to equality are inherently compounding throughout varying forms of undocumented immigrant activism (including the undocumented activism we saw with Comunidad Colectiva), the exclusions it forms are especially pronounced in the New Sanctuary Movement due to its strong association with the morals of the church in producing a rather conservative perception of immigrant deservingness. Thus, it is inevitable that while ‘good’ immigrant discourse is used to make the non-citizen visible and audible in a police order, such verifications of equality risk the possibility of making others invisible and inaudible. Discourse that focuses on the sanctity of family and the deservingness of non-criminal undocumented immigrants does create a distinction, and is therefore problematic in the ways that Çidam explains above. Rather than denying the political significance of playing the ‘others’ game, we should still acknowledge that this is a claim to equality, but accept that it is not pure and that it inherently creates its own inequalities.

The type of narrative evoked in the discourses of pro-immigrant activism can proclaim either that the undocumented are demanding their rights, or, it can create an image of the

non-citizen as objects of charity. Consequently, focusing on the ‘good’ immigrant discourse utilized by sanctuary activists may force us to think of sanctuary practices as a case of charity rather than a case of collective political action. By recognizing the impurity of politics, in which a part that has no part, plays the other’s game and creates its own inequalities even as it is forming equality, we can then focus on the aspects of solidarity established through coalition building in the NSM. As Çidam suggests “only in this way... can we avoid offering romanticized accounts of democratic events while also keeping alive the hopes of those who staged their equality by acting in ways other than expected of them, and, in doing so, exposed the indeterminacy of social roles and the sheer contingency of the existing order” (2021, 148). Sanctuary recipients effectively create a community of political networks as they act together, with citizens, to stage their equality.

Conclusion

In investigating two different types of non-citizen political action, grassroots campaigns and the NSM, we see varying versions of the ‘good’ immigrant trope, evoked in differing ways to fit the particular conditions and levels of precarity the undocumented find themselves in. With Comunidad Colectiva, Stefania Artega, and the coalitions of citizen activists they worked with, ‘good’ immigrant discourse underscored the unethical nature, and the long-lasting effects on neighborhoods across the nation, of familial separations. They also worked to call attention to the expanding definition of undocumented criminal offenses, indicating the ways in which ICE officers exercise liberties to arrest and deport immigrants for extremely minor violations. This type of language becomes even more restrictive and pronounced under the conditions of the NSM, where the undocumented are in an increasingly precarious position and at high risk for

deportation. Given the severity of the situation the sanctuary recipients are in, ‘good’ immigrant discourse does not focus on the arrests and deportations for minor criminal offenses, but rather spotlights undocumented immigrants with no criminal backgrounds. Sanctuary gives the undocumented a platform to speak publicly about their experiences with ICE and US immigration policies, and in doing so, call attention to the failures, contradictions, and injustices of the current system. Looking at these forms of undocumented activism from a Ranciéran perspective, non-citizens are effectively verifying their equality in making themselves both visible and audible by imitating others, expropriating their language, and acting in ways different than expected of them (Çidam 2021).

As numerous scholars have rightfully pointed out, this type of language is inherently problematic and contradictory in the ways that it establishes distinctions of deservingness between subgroups of undocumented immigrants. In revealing the discourse utilized by pro-immigrant activists and anti-immigrant activists alike, the paradoxical nature of such discourse becomes evident insofar as it creates inequalities even as it attempts to form equalities between the non-citizen and the citizen, rendering immigrants that do not fit into this characterization of the ‘good’ immigrant figuratively voiceless and invisible. Reliance on ‘good’ immigrant discourses and notions of deservingness risks the NSM becoming a case of charity, rather than an enactment of political agency. By understanding the short-comings of Ranciére’s theory, and in acknowledging the inequalities that arise through the other’s verification of equality, we can examine these practices of activism through the impurity of politics. Therefore, we can conceptualize a version of the Sanctuary Movement that does not turn into a case of charity by recognizing the exclusions it creates, as well as the importance of the unexpected display of political coalitions.

Even with its limits and contradictions, sanctuary nevertheless offers a mode of resistance and civil disobedience against the injustices of US immigration policies. In enabling diverse participants to act together, The Sanctuary Movement is an effective political strategy insofar as it is a collaborative action. As Freeland suggests, one of the “most effective NSM strategies and accomplishments is creating alliances among congregations, in particular with those who are supportive of immigrants” (Freeland 2010, 503). In examining NSM activities across numerous US states, he underscores the ways in which congregations and the NSM have become active participants in the struggle for comprehensive immigration reform mostly through building political coalitions with other pro-immigrant activists across the country:

For example, in Los Angeles coalitions have relationships with local Latino evangelical networks and have trained over 500 pastors in advocacy. In addition, in Costa Mesa, California, 27 white evangelical clergy engaged in a dialogue with 25 Latino evangelical clergy, which resulted in a commitment to bridge building between the congregations. Mennonite networks in New Mexico have also begun using the NSM story-based education method in a relationship with an NSM coalition in Albuquerque, and the NSM has been contacted by an evangelical network of 15,000 Latino congregations throughout the United States who would like to obtain education from sanctuary congregations. (; NSM Report, 2009, 6 as cited in Freeland 2010)

Consequently, we should find ways to reform it rather than completely discarding the political significance of this form of pro-immigrant activism. By dealing with the built-in inequalities the NSM creates, perhaps the best way to move forward would be to find ways to make it even more solidarity-based, rather than charity-based. Without subscribing to the romantic view of the NSM that recognizes citizens for their act of altruism in protecting the undocumented, and instead, recognizing the impurity of democratic politics, we can move forward without thinking about it as a case of charity, but rather as a case of political action through coalition building. Despite the extremely limited opportunities for political success, the undocumented still manage to form political links through collective practices of immigrant activism, as demonstrated through

grassroots campaigns and the New Sanctuary Movement. In the next chapter, I will further explore the significance of such collective activism by turning to the collaboration between activists in an even more precarious and restrictive environment: undocumented immigrant detention centers.

Chapter 2: Hunger Strike and The Political Significance of Storytelling

When the guards came into the center on May 6, 2020 and announced to the detainees that someone in their unit had died, Alberto had already gone 17 days without eating. A handful of other detainees in the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, California, had also gone multiple weeks without food. The detainee, a 57-year-old Salvadoran named Carlos Escobar-Mejia, who had lived in the United States for thirty years, had died from complications related to the coronavirus. Escobar-Mejia's death reminded Alberto and his fellow detainees exactly why they had gone on a hunger strike in the first place. The strike began in April with the detainees demanding humanitarian parole or a transfer out of their unit, where there had been multiple confirmed COVID-19 positive cases. However, as the days passed, their demands simplified, becoming a call for transparency and information—how many inside the center had the virus, had other detainees died, and what was going to happen next (Herrera, “Inside the ICE Detainee Hunger Strikes Across the Country”)? With the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizing the importance of physical distancing as the main strategy for preventing transmission of COVID-19, public health officials have recommended precautionary and extraordinary measures to help combat the spread of the virus. One area where there has been a limited or lack of responsive action to prevent fast spreading transmission of the virus is detention centers, including jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities (Amon 2020). Life inside immigration detention centers is already extremely precarious, with detainees living day to day with uncertainty, and all too often, suffering from degrading treatment. The panic surrounding health and safety concerns that have come along with a global pandemic have only further exposed the precarious nature of those living within detention centers. As non-citizens,

they have little knowledge of their rights, and little to no political voice that extends beyond the walls of the detention facility.

The use of immigration detention is on an exponential rise, with more than one million people passing through immigration detention centers in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe each year (“The International Detention Coalition” as cited in Fiske 2016). As the use of immigration detention has risen globally, the more frequently detainees are engaging in protest within the centers (Fiske 2016). Political activism can take various forms. Yet, bound within the extreme confines of immigration detention, the undocumented have limited avenues to claim visibility and display agency. Consequently, hunger strikes have become an increasingly common protest strategy within so-called “immigrant protests” as a last resort effort to perform political agency by turning one’s body into a vehicle of political claims (Tyler & Marciniak 2013). Essentially, hunger strike is a tactic used by individuals already deemed powerless and invisible to challenge those individuals in power and to achieve certain political and social change (Scanlan, Stoll, and Lumm 2008). Instances of hunger strikes have been carried out by immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and prison inmates (in some instances involving hundreds of individuals) in detention centers across the globe—Australia, Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Spain, Finland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Bahrain, among others (Bargu 2014). Scholars have turned to the question of hunger strikes as a “mode of doing politics” and engaging in “performances of agency” (Abrahamsson & Dányi 2018). In recognizing that their ability to act politically is significantly constrained, non-citizen detainees have engaged in a bodily form of resistance nonetheless.

When undocumented detainees go on a hunger strike, their attempts to engage politically and to be seen as legitimate political subjects are rarely heard beyond the four walls of the facility. Already in vulnerable and isolating situations, engaging in these bodily forms of protest places these actors at both physical and political risk. Furthermore, their actions are usually narrated by “governments keen to discredit them and their actions as criminal, manipulative, and evidence of their barbarity and difference” (Fiske 2016, 19). Their voices are silenced and altered, rendering them completely invisible within the political realm they so deeply wish to join. Isolated from life beyond the detention center, knowledge of such hunger strikes and other forms of self-destructive practices carried out in centers is extremely limited given that coverage is contingent on what is officially reported by local authorities, what portions of these instances make it to global news, and how much coverage they are given (Bargu, 2014). Nevertheless, the detainees themselves, those living in detention and taking action, attempt to form solidarity with one another to carry out these hunger strikes and act politically. Therefore, the central question of this chapter focuses on how we can conceptualize the collective and political significance of the hunger strike, with or without a political network that simultaneously exists inside and outside the detention facility.

Numerous scholars have turned to politically significant instances of prisoners engaging in hunger strikes in an attempt to understand the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for a political cause. Migrant detainees exist in draconian forms of isolation, with neither legal status nor the presence of a community. Despite conditions of precariousness and the loss of a political community, detainees still act politically through bodily forms of protest such as hunger strike, self-immolation, mouth-suturing, death fasting, and suicide attack. This chapter examines how non-citizen detainees attempt to become visible, all the while completely alone and lacking a

political community. Biopolitical accounts (Pfeifer 2018; Bargu 2014) cast hunger strike as a rejection of the conditions of abjection and bare life that these protestors find themselves in. Rather than an embrace of the abject as Pfeifer claims (Pfeifer 2018), I agree with Banu Bargu who argues that hunger strike embodies a complete refusal to accept abjection (Bargu 2014), whereby hunger strikers act as political agents, forming alliances with others both inside and outside detention (Montange 2017). I argue that to approach the performance of detainee resistance and agency through both a biopolitical lens and as a process of political subjectivization is helpful in both understanding why there is a turn to hunger strike in immigrant detention centers, and how this form of non-citizen activism can forge networks of solidarity to challenge conventional ideas of citizenship and sovereignty.

The chapter will proceed as follows: I will first turn to Michelle Pfeifer's account of the German refugee protests. According to Pfeifer's account hunger strike performed by the refugees can be best understood as an embrace of the refugees' abjection and a refusal "that resists the technologies of biopolitical sovereignty" (2018, 2). I will then turn to Banu Bargu to suggest that rather than an embrace of their abject status, hunger strike is a political act that involves a refusal to accept abjection. In examining Bargu's account, it is possible to see how hunger strike can become an attempt on the part of the detained to maintain sovereignty over their bodies. Bargu convincingly demonstrates that the Turkish prisoners acted as political agents despite the constraints of imprisonment by weaponizing the body as part of a political movement, forming alliances with a larger collective to continue their struggle against the state. Bargu's analysis offers an important insight into what undocumented migrants are doing when they engage in bodily forms of resistance. Yet, her account of the Turkish prisoners does not immediately translate to the experiences of undocumented migrants in detention centers, who,

not being political prisoners coming from an already existing movement, lack solidarity networks with the outside world. While the Turkish prisoners certainly found themselves in precarious conditions, they were not in complete isolation and instead, they were part of a larger political movement. Given this significant difference, this chapter will ask why and how undocumented detainees use hunger strike to become visible even when they are isolated in detention. In conversation with Leah Montange, I claim that in order to address these questions there is a need to look at the act of hunger strike beyond biopolitical accounts similar to that of Pfeifer and Bargu. Biopolitical accounts, that primarily focus on the starving body, offer a limited understanding of what these people are doing when they engage in hunger strikes and form networks of solidarity with other detainees and, in some instances, connect with outside citizens like journalists who can shed light on their actions. To elaborate this point, Montange's analysis of the 2014 hunger strikes at the Northwest Detention Center in which the detained "went through a process of political subjectivization, in which they exceeded their abject status by taking rights, space, and voice not ascribed to them" and forging political links both with other detainees and with activists beyond the facility (2017, 3). As a result, I will focus on the process in which the detained hunger strikers who lack political agency *become* political subjects by insisting access to rights and acting as citizens by forming solidarity networks beyond the constraints and precariousness of immigration detention. To do so, I will turn to the case study of detained asylum seekers, Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat, who attempted to establish political networks beyond detention through the power of WhatsApp messaging.

Hunger Strike as an ‘Embrace of the Abject’

Following the suicide of Iranian asylum seeker Mohammad R. in February 2012 in a refugee camp near Würzburg, Germany refugee protests ignited all over the country in which refugees established protest camps in major German cities and repeatedly went on hunger strike (Markus 2012 as cited in Pfeifer 2018). The demands of the protests were rooted in the abolition of *Lagerpflicht* and *Residenzpflicht*, policies, which, as many scholars agree, are implemented as discriminatory practices through a “racialization of asylum seekers who are imagined as a threat to the European project and provide necessary ground for the securitization of border, discriminatory asylum policies, and deportations” (Pfeifer 2018, 460). In examining the refugee hunger strikes through the context of the German asylum system, Michelle Pfeifer has called hunger strike practices of “becoming flesh” (2018, 461). By turning to Pfeifer’s biopolitical account of the hunger strikes, I will explore the ways in which non-citizens, in her view, are reduced to the condition of being abject, and given that they have no alternative, embrace the abject and engage in self-destructive acts.

A number of scholars, including Pfeifer, have centered their analyses of immigration detention and resistance upon the work of Giorgio Agamben and the concept of biopower. For Agamben, biopolitical and sovereign power intersect where the state’s sovereign power decides who is included as a human or a citizen, and who is the exception, thus reduced to a state of bare life. In her article, “Becoming Flesh: Refugee Hunger Strike and Embodiments of Refusal in German Necropolitical Spaces,” Pfeifer proposes that the refugee hunger strike staged in Würzburg, Germany “embodies a refusal that resists the technologies of biopolitical sovereignty and necropolitical violence in Europe” (2018, 460). Drawing on the theories of Agamben, Foucault, Mbembe, as well as theories of refusal, she suggests that bodily forms of protest

become a “practice of agential resistance” against German biopolitical state power (2018, 462).

Particularly, Pfeifer argues that hunger strikes operate as:

a form of becoming flesh, which makes visible how racialized violence is enacted on the refugees’ bodies [and] opens up an arena for reclamation in which the hunger strikers could articulate a politics of refusal that subverted the logics of recognition, empathy, and suffering liberal rights discourses rely on and, instead, performed an embrace of the refugees’ abjection. (Pfeifer 2018, 461)

Therein, she suggests that the refugees’ abjection should be understood through their politically subordinating situations that are established through the German racialized asylum system as disposable conditions of “living death” (Pfeifer 2018, 461). According to Judith Butler, the abject:

designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. (1999, 133)

By embracing this abjection of becoming ‘the other’ through the act of hunger strike, Pfeifer argues that there is a refusal to subscribe to biopolitical power and control. Therefore, in their embodiment of refusal and performance of self-destruction, the hunger strikers simultaneously embrace their abject positioning.

Other scholars have argued that the conditions of detention, asylum, and deportation in the United States mark the population of the undocumented as disposable. Nicholas De Genova, for instance, suggests that it is insufficient to examine the “illegality” of undocumented immigrants only in terms of its consequences, but we should also bear in mind the sociopolitical processes of migrant “illegality” (2002). In other words, the immigrant becomes a disposable commodity, which lies in the immigrant’s deportability, and not the act of deportation itself (2002). This is especially the case for undocumented migrants who find themselves in detention

facilities, as they become “bodies that have been marked for abandonment and are already considered unproductive within the logics of citizenship and belonging” (Pfeifer 2018, 461). Therefore, the individuals engaging in hunger strikes are already considered disposable as they stage a dangerous bodily form of public protest.

Pfeifer’s account of the hunger strike is relevant in the ways she underscores the hunger strike as opening up a space of agency for subjugated individuals, in which it “is an embodied practice through which political agency can emerge vis-à-vis political violence” by embracing the abject (Pfeifer 2018, 462). But there is a significant difference between the hunger strikes carried out publicly in the center of German cities and those carried out behind closed doors in detention and prison facilities. When detained migrants engage in a hunger strike, it is not simply an expression of despair in their refusal to accept biopolitical power, but rather it is a refusal to be reduced to the status of abject. In what follows, I elaborate this point by turning to Bargu’s account of Turkish prisoners to look further into the hunger strike and why precarious individuals and collectives engage in this form of resistance. Both Bargu and Pfeifer’s accounts view the hunger strike as a practice of refusal against the sovereign power in forging their own political agency. Yet, Bargu’s account views the hunger strike as it is staged by political objects standing up against the sovereign power as a *refusal* to accept their abjection.

Hunger Strike as an ‘Alternative Sovereignty’

In turning to Banu Bargu’s *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, I will examine the ways in which those who engage in bodily forms of resistance attempt to forge an alternative sovereignty over their own bodies. In *Starve and Immolate*, Bargu offers an ethnographic account of the death fasts undertaken by leftist Turkish prisoners that began in

response to the state's proposal to move political prisoners to high-security prisons. By March of 2001, approximately five hundred prisoners had joined the death fast. By its conclusion in 2007, sixty-seven people had starved themselves to death, while another twenty-two had self-immolated. In looking at how these political prisoners turned both the body and life into grounds for political claims, Bargu argues that hunger strikes are a "highly particular form of struggle in which life is forged into a weapon" (Bargu 2014, 9). Consequently, Bargu treats the death fasts as the foundation of claiming sovereignty over one's body, suggesting that the act of hunger strike itself can be understood as a form of expression of political rights.

Bargu's conceptualization of the weaponization of life encompasses a range of self-destructive practices, from "amputation, maiming, infection with disease, sewing of eyes and mouth, [and] temporary starvation...to the more fatal actions of self-immolation (understood as setting oneself on fire), temporally indefinite hunger strikes, fasts unto death, self-killing... and forms of suicide attack" (2014, 15). Bargu attempts to understand hunger strike (and other self-destructive practices) beyond just religious beliefs, individual motivation, psychology, or even past traumas. While past scholars have examined hunger strikes as irrational signs of desperation, Bargu suggests that

the tendency to construe these individuals as irrational, disturbed, brainwashed, or suicidal, tends to lose sight of the political context in which these actions take place, the conditions that give rise to them, and the ideological dispositions, motivations, and demands of the political groups and organizations that coordinate them. (Bargu 2014, 22)

Instead, *Starve and Immolate* demonstrates these actions as strategic choices, whether they are to be understood as a last resort effort or not. For Bargu, all of the bodily practices of self-destruction mentioned above constitute a form of political resistance. In engaging in these bodily forms of resistance, the prisoners suggest that the importance of life lay in collective

political cause, larger than any individual life. Hunger strikes are neither irrational nor signs of desperation, but rather an attempt to defend the sovereignty of the body over the sovereign power of a nation. Therefore, Bargu's understanding of a weaponization of life is extremely valuable in the way it views the hunger strike as a strategy of resistance emphasizing political subjectivity.

Bargu seeks to address questions that pertain not only to the Turkish death fasts but also other attempts of self-destructive radical politics: Under what conditions does self-killing amount to political resistance? Why do prisoners in particular resort to such self-destructive tactics? Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she illuminates the prison as an embodiment of contemporary state power. From Bargu's perspective, in forging their life into weapons, the imprisoned engage in a strategic act of refusal "to participate in one's own dehumanization," claiming both the state's necropolitical and sovereign power for themselves (Bargu 2014, 13). She demonstrates that these acts constitute the very opposition to the assertion that bare life should and can define human existence, and therefore constitute a refusal to accept their abject conditions. In refusing to accept bare life, the Turkish prisoners evolved into political agents by forming alliances with others both inside prison walls and beyond.

However, Bargu's focus is on Turkish prisoners who are political actors that already exist in a political community. As Patrick Anderson shows in this case of the Turkish death fasts, "collectivity and solidarity became crucial forms of sociality that moved the strikes outside the spaces of confinement and imprisonment and into the urban spaces of Turkish cities" (Anderson 2010 as cited in Pfeifer 2018). In weaponizing their body through hunger strike, they do so as part of a larger political movement that continues the struggle against the state beyond prison walls. Both Pfeifer and Bargu's account of hunger strikes are useful in understanding the reclaiming of agency and sovereignty. Yet, they do not emphasize that these cases of those who

are indeed precarious, but engage in a larger political movement, are significantly different to those who are precarious because they have been rendered invisible by the isolating and constraining spaces of detainment. What is at stake is not only a refusal to be reduced to the status of abject, even when that refusal implies claiming sovereignty over one's body. While biopolitical accounts focus on the starving body, I suggest that these accounts risk losing sight of what these political actors are doing when they forge political openings and establish networks of political beings both inside and outside of detention. Therefore, I will turn to Leah Montange who looks beyond biopolitical accounts of hunger strike, and examines the importance of building solidarity networks beyond confinement, thus enabling political signification, visibility, and potency.

Forging Relationships of Solidarity in Detention

While political prisoners, asylum seekers, and non-citizen detainees may be reduced to bare life in a number of ways, it is imperative that we look further into their political acts as a performance of rights, citizenship, and as a process of political subjectivization so as to highlight what these people are doing when they *collectively* engage in hunger strike, and attempt to make their actions known beyond the walls of the detention facility (Rancière 2004; Montange 2017). Montange states “that the conceptualization of the current global political order as hopelessly tending toward a deepening condition of bare life reproduces a view of migrant passivity” (2017). Yet, I assert through my reading of Bargu's conceptualization of the weaponization of life, biopolitical accounts allow us to understand the role of sovereign power in constraining detainee agency and their attempts to reclaim agency through the act of hunger strike. In orchestrating the hunger strike despite the abject conditions in which they reside in, participants

“exceeded their abject status by taking rights, space, and voice not ascribed to them” (Montange 2017, 3). However, with consideration of Leah Montange’s account of the 2014 hunger strikes at the Northwest Detention Center, I suggest that there is indeed a necessity to look beyond the influences of state sovereignty and biopower to examine the ways in which, despite their level of precariousness, detainees emerge as political subjects and form political coalitions of solidarity and activism. This need to look beyond biopolitical accounts rests in the idea that these accounts may lose sight of what the detainees are doing when they act collectively to establish solidarity with other political actors.

Inspired by the unanticipated political links forged with other detainees as well as activists and media outlets on the outside, Montange offers her own contribution to Critical Citizenship Studies through examination of the events that occurred at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC). On March 7, 2014, an estimated 1,200 detainees at the NWDC refused food, rupturing the political order of citizenship and sovereignty. The hunger strikes initially began following the detainees bearing witness to an anti-deportation protest staged by local activists outside of the detention center. After viewing this act of solidarity, they were determined to participate and decided to organize a hunger strike. A network of activists quickly began to support the hunger strikers in numerous ways, beyond just the actions taking place in the detention facility. The network was in close contact with those participating in the hunger strike, uplifting the voices and demands of the detained, and facilitating political links between the detainees and those outside of the center. This political network was crucial in the process in which “the boundary between political subject and non-political abject, noncitizen and citizen, legal and illegal faded” (Montange 2017, 9). Over the course of the year, the activism generated

media attention resulting in congressional response and a presidential executive order that temporarily delayed deportations.

Vital to Montange's understanding of the process of political subjectivization and the political "ruptures, resistance, and alternative specialities" that transpired through the detainee hunger strikes is what she considers the intimacies of contestation, which are:

the embodied interactions and techniques for forging political links and relationships that make possible contestation, [and] are what makes the acts of citizenship and processes of political subjectivization inside the detention center possible, and what enables them to reverberate through to the outside. (2017, 7)

Through both the interpersonal and the social relations that permeate detention walls the process of political subjectivization is able to occur, simultaneously allowing the detainees to emerge as political actors. Detainees were able to transform their bodily protest into what Montange considers a rupture of the political order of citizenship and sovereignty. In doing so, individuals otherwise existing outside the dichotomy of citizenship, act as citizens through their political actions and coalitions. While detention centers operate to "performatively [forge] state sovereignty and the boundary between citizens and noncitizens," detainees effectively blurred that line through the collective action performed by both citizens and non-citizens (Hall 2012 as cited in Montange 2017).

Montange highlights a crucial component in the detainees ability to 'successfully' stage a hunger strike that moved beyond detention walls and facilitated "their potential as acts of citizenship" (2017, 11). For one, the detainee hunger strikers at NWDC connected, embedded, and positioned their claims within a larger national anti-detention, anti-deportation movement:

As detainees reached out to local activists and media, local activists reached back... and through these political and interpersonal relations, linked the detainees to national organizing efforts not only through their statements of solidarity, but through coordinated events. (Montange 2017, 11-12)

While this certainly does not undermine the detainee's remarkable feat in leveraging a political opening, the local, national, and global political context only served to amplify their actions and demands. McGregor (2011) notes that political space hinges upon the political opportunity structure, with space only occasionally opening up within the constraining conditions of detention, allowing such challenges to the sovereign government displayed by the hunger strikers at the NWDC. Given the dire conditions that characterize their detention, how can we understand the detainees manufacturing of political opportunity in the draconian and constraining spaces of detention through non-citizen activism and hunger strike? In order to better understand the political opportunities of rupture produced by detainee activism such as hunger strikes, and to explore the various ways in which detainees are able to exceed the separations and isolations of detainment in order to form political relationships with those outside detention, I will turn to the remarkable cases of Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat. In stretching their limited resources on Australia's offshore detention center of Manus Island, they attempt to form solidarity with those in the outside world through a series of WhatsApp text and voice messages.

Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat

The detention of asylum seekers on offshore islands has become central to Australia's border security program. Under Australia's migration policy, asylum seekers who have tried to enter by sea are completely barred from ever entering the country. Consequently, more than 3,000 refugees and asylum seekers have been sent to Australia's offshore detention centers on the Republic of Nauru and Manus Island since 2013 (Kwai & Albeck-Ripka 2019). Offshore processing of asylum seekers is premised "upon a technology of distance, which not only removes asylum seekers from the territory of the state but also relies on ambiguous geographies

of responsibility and operational invisibility” (Dickson 2015). The political geography of these spaces, of both Manus and Nauru, enables the state of Australia to circumvent obligations of transparency, visibility, and responsibility. Since the detention centers were put into use in 2013, they have been plagued by illness, self-harm, and complaints of extensive human rights violations (Kwai & Albeck-Ripka 2019). To further employ the importance of assembling political relationships of solidarity in leveraging political openings, particularly in conditions of severe isolation in detention, I will turn to the cases of Behrouz Boochani and Abdul Aziz Muhamat—two migrants detained on Australia’s offshore detention center, Manus Island. I argue that the stories shared by Aziz and Boochani exhibit the ways in which we can understand why the politically isolated detainee turns to hunger strike as a reclaiming of their own sovereignty (Bargu 2014). Moreover, in their attempts to forge political relationships beyond the island, their storytelling simultaneously constitutes a process of political subjectivization, whereby they managed to leverage a political opening exceeding the (non-existent) political rights and claims to citizenship with which their position was imbued.

Behrouz Boochani is a Kurdish-Iranian journalist who was forced to flee political persecution in Iran after police had arrested several of his journalist colleagues. On his journey to seek asylum, the Australian Navy intercepted his boat as he was trying to reach the country and he was sent to Manus Island in 2013. To fill the limitless hours of incarceration in detention, Boochani recommenced his work as a journalist, and began to write down his experiences as an asylum seeker. *No Friend but the Mountains* is Boochani’s autobiographical account of his illegal six-year detainment on Manus Island. Boochani’s novel was written on a smuggled cell phone and translated one WhatsApp message at a time. As such, it serves as an eyewitness account of his process of migration, as well as the dehumanizing experiences thousands of

asylum seekers have been subject to at the hands of the Australian government in offshore detention facilities. By exposing the atrocities he witnessed, the book's contents and its very existence can be considered as an effective act of defiance against migration regimes that exist not only in Australia, but globally.

Within a global context, some studies have examined the construction of offshore detention as “sites of exaggerated biopolitical power, spaces where states segregate and control certain categories of mobile bodies, suspending human agency” (Dickson 2015). While his novel does not explicitly mention the hunger strikes that took place on Manus Island, I suggest that Boochani's first hand account of the ways in which the detainees were dehumanized, reduced to conditions of being abject, and existed in a state of bare life provides context and a deeper understanding of the turn to hunger strike. From the point of Boochani's detainment onward, each page accounts for a different aspect of residing in custody including; starvation, loneliness, hopelessness, and the often self-destructive ways detainees act as a result of their dire circumstances. Most notably however, Boochani describes the mundane and repetitive existence that becomes his life isolated from the rest of the world. He also recounts the degrading treatment he and his fellow detainees are subjected to at the hands of the prison guards and the Australian state. Here, he discusses being “forced to straddle the border between human and animal” in relation to both the lack of agency he now has over his life (Boochani 2018, 232). This quote also serves to underscore the physical conditions he is subjected to, including; uncomfortable and cramped living quarters, and the continuous smell of body odor. He begins to describe himself as a “piece of meat with a mind that is always moving between the darkest, dullest, and most worn out scenes” (Boochani 2018, 131), entering into a state of abjectness he hoped he had escaped when he began his journey to Australia.

However, in exposing the systemic human rights abuses Boochani views as inherent to the detention system, we can understand his writing as a tool of political resistance, as an attempt to establish global links of solidarity, and as an act of reclaiming his voice. As aforementioned, these global links of solidarity are,

important ‘sites’ for understanding the resistances to sovereign power in zones of exclusion such as detention centers [and] these relationships of solidarity involve the building of lines of communication and political action that bridge the boundaries of detention spaces, so that detainee’s activism and actions are connected with political networks and political struggles outside of detention. (Montange 2017, 7)

Through his writing, Boochani was able to reach a global audience, earning their empathy for the conditions of abjection detainees are forced to exist within. Published in 2018, *No Friend but the Mountains* became an award-winning best seller and winner of the Australia’s prestigious Victorian Premier’s Literary Award in 2019 (Kwai & Albeck-Ripka 2019).

Through his storytelling, Boochani attempted to bring increased awareness and “knowledge” of undocumented immigrants lack of rights in detention centers to the public. In doing so, he aimed to create sustained collective action among refugees, pro-immigrant and human rights activists. While detailing the human rights abuses he and others have experienced, he has gained international recognition and has worked with numerous human rights NGOs in continuing the struggle to keep Australia accountable for their human rights abuses. Amnesty International has stated:

We campaign for the rights of refugees around the world. Behrouz is not only a refugee, but a human rights defender whose dedicated journalism from within a detention centre earned him several awards and accolades. He is a voice for truth... (“Behrouz Boochani welcomes to New Zealand by Amnesty International for literary festival” 2019)

As this quote suggests, there is significant importance to giving those who have suffered from the human rights abuses that exist in detention centers a voice and platform to speak upon.

Through storytelling, Boochani effectively generated public consciousness of the horrific events occurring in offshore detention, including the detainee hunger strikes and the political claims they were making as a result.

Other Manus Island detainees, such as Abdul Aziz Muhamat, have similarly attempted to call attention to the atrocities detainees were subject to at the hands of the Australian government. *The Messenger* is a podcast that further reveals the dehumanizing experiences of detainees inside the detention center on Manus Island. Smuggling a cellphone into the center and using it secretly, the podcast is based on thousands of WhatsApp voice messages Aziz sent to Australian journalist Michael Green, each message chronicling a different facet of his refugee experience. In one of his first voice messages Aziz describes the main purpose for the podcast:

We have been locked away [on] an isolated island, far away from the other world. When you cry or when you scream, no-one can hear you. So I thought that it is a better idea for me to be the messenger — when people scream, when people cry — so that other people will hear. (*The Messenger* 2017)

Here, Aziz himself illuminates the necessity for political networks of solidarity, as he attempts to serve as a ‘messenger’ of the atrocities taking place on Manus Island to the outside world.

Through his voice messages and podcast, Aziz strives to exceed the separations and isolations of detention, particularly present in offshore detention, in order to establish a break in the political order by asserting who gets to make such assertions and utilize political voice (Montange 2017).

In the sixth episode of the podcast titled “A New Plan,” published on April 10, 2017, Aziz tells Michael about a detainee hunger strike. Upon first arriving at Manus Island, Aziz recounts how the detainees practiced patience and acts of peaceful protest. However, after years of no answers regarding their refugee status or what was going to happen to them, their patience had turned into agitation and riots broke out in protest. Unintentionally, the riot turned deadly,

namely leading to the death of detainee Reza Berati. Consequently, the detainees agreed to “change the game,” and go on hunger strike:

So it is like, okay, let's go on hunger strike. Hunger strike was a part of our rights and it's peaceful, and it's very strong, it's strong. So the only way we can send [a] message is [through] the hunger strike... I knew that the hunger strike is the powerful message that every prisoner like us... they can use it to achieve their goal, or they can use it in order to send their message to the world that we are really suffering, and we need help... I know it's really stupid but um, you know, there's nothing we can do to stop this indefinite detention centers. At least we can take our lives away by our own hands... I was actually, I wasn't scared at all. (*The Messenger* 2017)

Here, Aziz displays in his own words Bargu's conceptualization of an alternative sovereignty, in which those orchestrating the hunger strike take their lives into their own hands and participate in a form of political resistance. By some reports, up to 700 men refused food and water (*The Messenger* 2017). Rather than accept their fate at the hands of the Australian state, detainees formed political coalitions, orchestrated a hunger strike, and in doing so, weaponized their own lives against the sovereign.

In deconstructing Aziz's language in the quote above, Aziz becomes a sort of de facto representative of the detainees. He is not only telling his own story, but he is also telling the story of the other detainees that otherwise lack an avenue to exercise their voice. As a spokesperson for himself and others, he serves as a connection between the detainees engaging in political action in the hopes of gaining political recognition in the outside world. Thus, Aziz serves to raise more questions about the political nature of storytelling: How does it humanize the detainees? What effect does transforming this into a podcast have? Who is the intended audience? The political implications of storytelling arise through the connections they make with other political actors, reaching beyond barriers, or in this case, detention walls, to make the voice of the undocumented heard.

To an outsider, and more specifically, an outsider that is a citizen, the way Aziz casually mentions the turn to hunger strike would be cause for pause and contemplation. This is because undocumented migrants represent one of the most precarious groups of political beings, whereas their opportunities for acting politically and claiming rights they do not yet have, is significantly constrained. However, given their status as precarious individuals and the nonexistent political community to which they can lean on for support, hunger strike is what they turn to. As a non-citizen, Aziz considers the act of hunger strike to be a part of his rights, even while having no other recourse to the rights that a citizen would have. Therefore, the act of hunger strike, in the eyes of Aziz, is his way of actualizing the rights that are, legally, not his to claim. In recognizing his own precariousness and acknowledging his limited avenues to claim rights and visibility as a non-citizen, Aziz himself states that there is nothing they can do to stop indefinite detention. Interestingly enough, Aziz makes this statement even while engaging in a form of political activism. Namely, by sending even these sporadic thirty-second WhatsApp voice memos to Michael Green, Aziz's storytelling is, in effect, a form of political activism. This goes to show that hunger strike is not the end goal, but rather just the beginning of the process of claiming rights. In other words, storytelling is a crucial aspect to this form of activism due to the undocumented's severe isolation. Storytelling disseminates the proceedings that occur behind the four walls of the facility, making the dehumanizing conditions and rights abuses which gave rise to such self-destructive acts known.

The cases of Boochani and Aziz illuminate an effort to form political solidarity with others even when you are completely alone. The nature of detention is that there is effectively no connection to the outside world of political networks. However, to leverage a political opening and create lines of communication that permeate detention facilities, detainees need a voice to

make it known to the public outside of the detention walls. Boochani's writing and Aziz's podcast suggest that the act of hunger strike is not the end, but just the beginning of rights struggles. It is possible that when detainees engage in hunger strike, they are refusing to be reduced to the status of abject and are enacting an alternative sovereignty over their own bodies, all of which is political in of itself. However, the actions of Boochani and Aziz aim to demonstrate what biopolitical accounts may be missing when they direct their attention only to the starving body. There is political significance in not only in the starving body creating its own sovereignty, but also in the attempts to form political networks with other political actors to make the hunger strikes known.

Conclusion

In turning to hunger strikes in undocumented immigrant detention centers, I demonstrate the varying biopolitical ways that the detained non-citizen resorts to hunger strike as a result of their precariousness and loss of a political community. Without activists to shed light on the existence of rights and subsequent state's abuses of rights, democratic rights cannot be effective nor actualized in practice. As seen through the example of Boochani and Aziz, the ability to have their voice heard when victims of the greatest level of precariousness is itself a form of political activism that both pushes against the sovereign powers and allows them to claim their rights through the expression of their voice. As was illustrated, more than just giving the individual immigrant a platform and a voice, their ability to engage in this level of activism allowed for the dissemination of a collective consciousness. Both Boochani and Aziz described the reality of many undocumented immigrants, not just themselves. And, through the sharing of their stories, they worked to ensure that these collective voices were heard and societal consciousness was

informed. We thus can begin to see how storytelling may serve to further humanize and give political agency to the detainees beyond just the image of the starving body.

Conclusion

Immigration has increasingly become a headline in the media and a contentious topic in political and social debates around the globe. With the frequency that immigration is discussed in the public realm, a majority of those undocumented migrant and refugee headlines focus primarily on the negative representations of them, viewing the undocumented with so much hatred and contempt (Pupavac 2008). Other discussions, spearheaded by pro-immigrant citizens, view the undocumented with pity and in dire need of citizen aid. Yet, in shifting the debate from questions of “who belongs?” or, “who doesn’t belong?” and the ways in which citizens attempt to dictate the immigrant experience, I instead focus on the undocumented immigrant as a political being in of itself by examining the political ways in which non-citizens act.

In recognizing the precarity of undocumented immigrants, a condition which effectively renders them voiceless and inaudible, I emphasize that these non-citizens act in political ways nonetheless. In examining varying forms of undocumented immigrant activism and rights claims, and, by introducing what the undocumented immigrant does, what they say, and how they act in ways unexpected of them, I emphasize the democratic nature of forging into the political sphere, emerging as political beings to enact one’s equality, and in doing so, forming political networks of solidarity. As Karen Zivi points out “it is through the making of rights claims that we contest and constitute the meaning of individual identity, the contours of community, and the forms that political subjectivity takes” (Zivi 2011, 7). And thus, undocumented immigrant activism and what it reveals about democratic politics can help us to further conceptualize the gap between active, political enactments of citizenship, and the technical legal framework of what it means to hold citizenship in the future.

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