

## **Sights of Violence: Self-Immolation at the Border**

**Abstract:** As violent forms of border control have become increasingly diverse and prevalent, migrants and their allies have struggled to find adequate techniques for resistance. Without much notice from scholars and analysts, self-immolation has become part of this repertoire of resistance. Because migrant self-immolations take place in different countries and are committed by individuals of diverse nationalities, these events are treated as disconnected incidents: conflicts between specific migrants and the states which deny them entry. I argue that it is politically and analytically essential that we be able to “read” these events together. Towards this end, I propose one possible framework for analysis: reading these events as a form of migrant counterconduct that is produced by and responsive to specific modalities of border violence. In this article, I focus on migrant self-immolations “addressed” to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – the most visible international symbol of migrant management. Examining border violence through the politics of visibility and visibility, I show how borderwork makes it impossible to see, count, and account for the pain and death that result from violence at the border. Closely reading administrative procedures and border policing strategies, I show how self-immolation responds directly to these modes of violence and their attendant politics of visibility. Self-immolation brings migrant death into view, manifests the violence of the border, and powerfully counters state claims to “rescue” migrants.

**Keywords:** migration, resistance, border violence, self-immolation, necropolitics

The recent resurgence of nationalist and supremacist tendencies in the Global North seems to have unleashed a growing list of strategies designed to curb “undesirable” immigration. Border policing activities are expanding both inward (i.e., towards the domestic interior) and outward (i.e., into supposedly non-national spaces, like international waters). As border control and its attendant violence swell, migrants and their allies have struggled to find adequate techniques for resistance.<sup>1</sup> Without much notice from scholars and analysts, self-immolation has become an established part of their repertoire.

Because migrant self-immolations take place in different countries and are committed by individuals of diverse nationalities, these events are treated as disconnected incidents: conflicts between specific migrant groups and the states which deny them. However, this approach has a diminishing effect: it obfuscates possible patterns, trends, and interlinkages. I argue that we must find ways to think these actions as a set or collective, if we are to understand their work. The political stakes of this acknowledgement are high: the refusal or inability to read these self-immolations together presents a real political problem for migrant justice. It ignores, and even forbids, the possibility of unified action. It also presents a problem for analysis: because migrant self-immolations are treated as individual (and even aberrant) events rather than part of a trend or pattern, there are no repositories or archives which track them. As a result, the data on this subject – qualitative and quantitative alike – is scant, which further impedes analysis. At the same time, state policies (ranging from deliberate practices of poor record-keeping to out-and-out censorship) obfuscate and efface records of migrant self-immolations. Often, all that remains are meager traces: descriptions of Twitter videos that have been removed from circulation, online

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “migrants” to emphasize the inaccessibility of formal refugee status (an issue to which I return below). Although all the migrants I describe here were actively seeking refugee status, most of them were not granted the formal classification.

news articles with broken links. As a result, it is difficult – if not impossible – to arrive at any definite conclusions about migrant self-immolation. Nevertheless, I argue that it is crucial to identify pathways for analysis. This article sketches one potential pathway: thinking across a framework for analyzing self-immolation, forms of border violence, and theories of migrant resistance. I draw out border securitization’s “signature styles” of violence which are shared across sites to identify unifying threads. I focus on the migrants’ relationship with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which serves as gatekeeper, steward of knowledge, and wielder of administrative power at sites across the globe. Thinking about these self-immolations as a rebuke to shared modalities of border violence offers one way of understanding these events in relation to one another, and of challenging the portrayals which sever their connections. Therefore, while the reading I propose here is inherently speculative, it is also important for the model it provides and the possibilities that it opens.

To analyze migrant self-immolation in the absence of robust data, I begin with theories of border violence and of migrant resistance. I find this approach particularly promising because it offers a potential solution to an important puzzle: reading self-immolation through the lens of border violence suggests one explanation for the recent turn to self-immolation in contexts where it lacks a long history, as well as the use of self-immolation across migration contexts despite the absence of communication between groups. From this perspective, Pakistani asylum-seekers detained in off the coast of Australia and Ethiopian asylum-seekers held in Libyan migrant detention camps do not need to share a cultural history or have an explicit exchange of tactics to have both selected self-immolation as their mode of protest. They need only face the same adversary and the same limiting conditions. It is on these shared conditions, therefore, that I focus.

There is ample support in the literature on the politics of migration to sustain this strategy of analyzing tactics of resistance through the forms of power to which they respond. Jonathan Xavier Inda suggests, following Michel Foucault, understanding these modes of resistance as examples of *counterconduct*.<sup>2</sup> The language of “counterconduct” highlights the ways forms of resistance are produced by, responsive to, and also productive *of* power. Migrant counterconducts, then, are forms of resistance that are produced by and imbricated with the violence of border control. Adapting the framework of migrant counterconduct to examine self-immolation specifically, I propose that migrant self-immolations can be productively analyzed as actions produced by and responsive to the self-effacing nature of border violence – the aspects of border policing which render migrant lives and migrant deaths as unthinkable, uncountable, unseeable.

Analyzing migrant self-immolations as counterconduct in relation to border policing’s politics of visibility requires several steps: first, I sketch out the political work of self-immolation. Next, I examine border violence in relation to visibility and visibility. I then discuss theories of migrant resistance which might elucidate the work of migrant self-immolation. Lastly, I discuss self-immolations undertaken by migrants, focusing on those “addressed” to the UNHCR. Using the limited available documentary evidence and the framework developed in the

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<sup>2</sup> Inda draws his interpretation of counterconducts from Foucault’s *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*. As he summarizes: “there is strategic reversibility to power relations such that any governmental effort to shape the conduct of individuals and populations is interwoven with dissenting counterconducts... This way of governing immigrants has elicited dissenting counterconducts.” Jonathan Xavier Inda, “Borderzones of enforcement: Criminalization, workplace raids, and migrant counterconducts.” in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, ed. Vicki Squire. (London, Routledge: 2011).

first and second sections, I offer a possible method for placing these acts into conversation with each other and with broader modes of migrant resistance.

### **Self-Immolation: A Framework for Analysis**

As I have argued elsewhere, self-immolation is an act of intentional material transformation in which a living and coherent body is remade as a burnt and destroyed one.<sup>3</sup> It mobilizes spectacular pain and the material degradation of the body as a medium for political claims. Of course, the body of the self-immolator does not exist in a vacuum: it acquires meaning through the discursive interaction between the body, its audiences, and the spaces in which self-immolations are staged. In doing so, self-immolation uses the body to maintain the possibility of resistance when other modes of action are foreclosed: for those who are denied access to the formal venues of politics – or even presumed incapable of political agency – self-destruction offers a politics of last resort. Willful self-destruction inverts oppressive violence by claiming independent mastery over life and death, and inherently rejects the equivalence between bodily vulnerability and weakness. It reframes vulnerability as a source of potential power: by *choosing* death, self-immolators wrest back the power over life and death and assert themselves as political agents.<sup>4</sup>

The self-ignited burning body forces the viewer to reckon with the conditions of its production. Perhaps the most important of these conditions is extreme pain. The intensely – perhaps uniquely – painful quality of burning to death is both an important component of self-immolation’s political work and a signal that self-immolation is not merely about resignation or

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<sup>3</sup> Archana Kaku, “Burning the Body: The Bodily Politics of Tibetan Self-Immolation,” *Theory & Event* 23.3 (2020): 573-606

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed examination of the ways self-harm and destruction can subvert and invert state violence, see: Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)

hopelessness. Put simply, there are easier ways to die. To choose self-immolation is to choose a particularly difficult death. Why would one choose to die this way? One factor is that unlike most forms of intense pain, burning is a *familiar* for audiences: burning is a kind of pain that threatens us regularly (albeit on a small scale) in our daily lives. This recognition intensifies the impact of the spectacle by inciting recognition: it is impossible not to recall and reimagine pain we have experienced. Video footage of the self-immolation of Omid Masoumali, which I discuss below, shows onlookers vomiting, on the verge of nervous collapse, at the sight of his mangled body and the sound of his screams.<sup>5</sup> The self-immolator compels their audience to recognize pain; to struggle with their own bodily repulsion to the sight of suffering, and the feeling of horror that this spectacle provokes. Witnesses are forced to participate in this identification of and with pain, creating relationships that can be leveraged for political demands.

This kind of pain – loud, self-evident – is a powerful resource for displaying forms of pain that are rendered or inherently unseen. As Banu Bargu described it, in her discussion of Turkish self-immolators, this actions “ask us to become cognizant of the nature of the power relations in which we live and die, the asymmetries and injustices they entail, and our own investment and complicity in them.”<sup>6</sup> I will argue that this capacity is what enables self-immolation to operate as counterconduct for migrants, whose suffering is rendered invisible through policies and procedures of borderwork.

Self-immolation is also an interruption. It creates a dramatic break in the landscape of everyday politics. As such, it belongs to the broader category of what Engin Isin and Greg

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Doherty & Helen Davidson. “Self-immolation: desperate protests against Australia’s detention regime.” *The Guardian*. (May 3, 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 350

Nielsen call “acts of citizenship.” Isin and Nielsen describe these acts as those which “disrupt habitus, create new possibilities, claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones; pose their claims in enduring and creative expressions; and, most of all, are the actual moments that shift established practices, status, and order.”<sup>7</sup>

While this framework was not developed with self-destruction in mind, self-immolation exemplifies the qualities of an act of citizenship. First, as a spectacular event it is intensely disruptive and “emotionally charged.” Witnesses describe the fixating sight of the body ablaze; the smell of gasoline; the reek of burning skin and hair; the discomfiting sounds of human flesh sizzling and onlookers screaming. By brutally and deliberately “disrupt[ing] habitus,” self-immolation allows for the articulation of demands that “established practices, status, and order” would disallow.

The spectacle of self-immolation captivates its audience through the forceful joining of two seemingly incompatible temporalities. The flames are sudden: accelerant catches in a single flare. Observers describe the split-second appearance of roaring flames where there was stillness a moment before. Fire is voracious; its demands are urgent. If you are going to respond to fire, you must respond *now*. This temporality clashes jarringly with the temporality of the burning body: most of the body’s mass is excruciatingly slow to burn. Indeed, fire of this kind will never burn hot enough to fully reduce a body to tidy ash. For self-immolators who are extinguished, it can take days, or even weeks, for their burns to cause death.

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<sup>7</sup> Engin F. Isin & Greg M. Nielsen (editors), *Acts of Citizenship*. (London; New York: Zed Books, 2008). The category of citizen is fraught, especially when it comes to the politics of migration. Focusing on *acts* of citizenship highlights the profound limitations of the liberal interpretation of citizenship-as-legal-category and offers a powerful alternative for thinking about political subjectivity and belonging.

In this process, self-immolation destroys the “status and order” of the body. The devastated remains of the self-immolator confront us with a human body that has transformed into something strange and mangled that is, nevertheless, still human. We might contrast this kind of burning with, for example, modern crematoriums, which can reduce a body to a milk-carton’s worth of ashes in less than an hour.<sup>8</sup> The remnants of the modern crematorium do not resemble anything human. But the burnt bodies of self-immolation keep their form and shape, insisting that audiences grapple with the meaning of what it means to be human, and what demands this fraught-but-shared humanity makes on us. It calls for an identification that, being visceral and bodily, does not require external legitimation: it is a demand that one body makes on another. For political subjects whose humanity has been systematically denied, this provocation to reconsider the human is a powerful demand. As Isin & Nielsen summarize, such acts “create a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is ‘yet to come.’”<sup>9</sup> By interrupting established patterns and imagining new possibilities, acts of citizenship offer a pathway for those who have been systematically excluded from political life to assert their agency and, on an even more fundamental level, their humanity.

In the section that follows, I set the stage for analyzing migrant self-immolations by examining border violence in terms of visibility and visibility. Although different aspects of border violence manifest seemingly contradictory relations to visibility, their effects are supplementary. The first form is *forced invisibility*. The politics and processes of border management deliberately render migrant lives – and migrant deaths – as invisible. Border management processes make it impossible to see, count, and account for the pain and death that

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<sup>8</sup> See, for further discussion: Thomas W. Laqueur, *The work of the dead: a cultural history of mortal remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Isin & Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship*, 4

result from violence at the border. Administrative processes render migrants invisible as *subjects*, substituting instead images of migrant-as-criminal or even migrant-as-deferred-arrival. Other processes, such as the collection of biometric data at borders, render migrants-as-data, disaggregated from human lives into an amalgamation of trackable body parts.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the space of the borderlands is the site of the “Border Spectacle.”<sup>11</sup> This spectacle has multiple parts. One part is the design of border walls and fortifications to appear imposing, dangerous, and impassable. But as Ruben Andersson points out in his ethnography of sea and land migration into Spain, this display of technologies of violence gives rise to a spectacle of another kind: the spectacle of humanitarianism.<sup>12</sup> The coupling of humanitarianism and overt violence which characterizes the Border Spectacle exemplifies the mode of modern state power that Michel Foucault described as *biopolitics*. Biopolitics, as Foucault famously articulated it, is “the right to make live and to let die.”<sup>13</sup> Biopolitics names a mode of political power which is focused on an internal threat that must be destroyed for the chosen population to survive. Part of the work of biopolitics, then, is to determine who the chosen population is, who threatens this population, and how the two are to be divided. As such, it is a kind of power which is always simultaneously productive and destructive, and which requires the ongoing creation and policing of boundaries.

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<sup>10</sup> For examples, see: Nomaan Merchant, “Border Patrol expands fingerprinting of migrant children.” *AP News*. April 26, 2019; Priscilla Alvarez & Geneva Sands. “Exclusive: DHS to start DNA testing to establish family relationships on the border.” *CNN*. May 1, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See, for foundational theories of the Border Spectacle, Nicholas De Genova, “Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 36.7 (July 2013); Nicholas De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 31. (2002)

<sup>12</sup> Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe*. (Oakland, CA: University of California, 2014)

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. (New York; Picador, 2003): 255. See especially lectures four and eleven.

The Border Spectacle engages both the productive and destructive elements of biopolitics. The militarization of otherwise safe crossing sites drives migration towards increasingly dangerous routes. In these dangerous routes – through sea or desert – many migrants are “let die” (to use the Foucauldian formulation) unseen, allowing the state to deny its violence. But others (still following Foucault) are made to live, especially through the form of interception at sea. In this spectacle of rescue, *detaining migrants* and *saving migrants* are collapsed into each other. In the context of these conditions, self-immolation may be a particularly legible tactic for migrants who seek to resist the violence of the border – an insight which I suggest offers one way of conceptually linking these wide-ranging events. To examine the violence that borders enact on the bodies of migrants, I briefly sketch out two sites of the work I describe above: the administrative processes involved in seeking “legal” status, and the terrain of the transit corridors as they are shaped by policing and surveillance.

**Border Manifestations: Administrative Violence and Corridors of Crossing**  
*Violence as Procedure*

Refugee status offers migrants one pathway into the realm of recognition, authorization, and protection. But the processes required to pursue this status are replete with violence of their own. The asylum process manifests as deferral: it is the temporality of pursuing a hope that is constantly receding from view. Shifting laws, Sisyphean procedures, and conflicting priorities combine in unstable and unpredictable ways, tangling processes that are ostensibly straightforward. Because the international legal definition of “refugee” reflects an administrative classification rather than a set of practices, the only way to appear (in international and national law) as a refugee is to complete the procedures of an asylum claim. These procedures can run counter to the actualities of seeking asylum. For example, experientially, one becomes a refugee by *leaving* – in the moment of coerced departure from one’s natal state. But the administrative

process of becoming a refugee begins with *arrival*: a migrant applies for asylum *from* and *within* a specific state.<sup>14</sup> In practice, this means that militarized borders can prevent border crossers from even pursuing protected status, since they cannot pursue an asylum claim unless they survive to enter a state from which they can apply. Thus, physical and administrative violence combine to render migrant deaths *doubly* invisible.

This doubled effect provides a powerful reminder of the importance of reading legal and physical violence together. Immigration law and procedures are an example of what Lisa Marie Cacho describes as the “violence of value” in her evaluation of racialization in American law. As she explains:

Because the law is presumed to be both ethical and irreproachable, the act of law-breaking reflects poorly on a person’s moral character. If following the law (legitimate or not) determines whether a person is moral or immoral, it is all but impossible for people assigned to certain status categories [such as “illegal alien”] to represent themselves as moral and deserving.<sup>15</sup>

The overreading of legality and morality inherently disadvantages migrants’ pursuit of authorization: their very presence, read as evidence of law-breaking, is assumed to imply immorality. This presumed immorality then undermines their ability to make claims based on moral or ethical grounds – a serious concern for asylum-seekers, since asylum claims rely on a

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<sup>14</sup> This classificatory system also presents problems for those who are internally displaced, since they face many of the same forms as violence as migrants (including border-related violence) but have no recourse to refugee status. Additionally, some states – notably the United States, France, and recently Britain – have established “offshore” asylum procedures. These offshore “processing centers” reiterate the forced invisibility of asylum-seekers by delaying (if not fully denying) their entry into their intended asylum state.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social death: racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012): 4

kind of moral imperative.<sup>16</sup> The violence of this valuation, then, is that it demands proofs of purity from migrants that it simultaneously forbids. The law predetermines migrant bodies to be criminal and undeserving, while concurrently demanding that migrants *prove* their innocence.

Cacho emphasizes the role of the body in this trap of criminalization. Laws that create statuses like “illegal immigrant” forbid the possibility of compliance because, as Cacho describes it, “law targets their being and their bodies, not their behavior.”<sup>17</sup> This logic is pervasive. For example, internal communications regarding Australia’s maritime “deterrence” policy, Operation Sovereign Borders, exhorted staff of the newly-renamed Department of Immigration and Border Protection (previously the Department of Immigration and Citizenship) to refer to asylum-seekers as “illegal arrivals.”<sup>18</sup> This linguistic shift enacts the kind of violence Cacho describes: it delinks migrants from their political claim – asylum – and permanently links their bodies and their presence to illegality. Referring to migrants as “arrivals” exacerbates this effect by freezing them at the moment of transgression. It forecloses the possibility that migrants are simply *here*, suggesting instead that migrants are always at the threshold from which they might be rebuffed. The state disavows their presence, disclaiming any link between the locations of migrant bodies and their status.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, writing from the perspective of legal history, Colin Grey emphasizes the close and somewhat unique relationship between morality and refugee law. He writes: “I take the historical record to establish the distinctive salience of morality to refugee law. It seems accurate to say that contemporary refugee law was created precisely to ensure states’ immigration laws and policies do not reproduce the gross injustice or inhumanity of the mass rejection of Jewish refugees during the Second World War. The origins of refugee law demand therefore that legal competence track moral competence...” Colin Grey, “Refugee Law and Its Corruptions” *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence* 2 (August 2017): 343-344.

<sup>17</sup> Cacho, *Social Death*, 6

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion, see Paul Hodge, “A grievable life? The criminalisation and securing of asylum-seeker bodies in the ‘violent frames’ of Australia’s *Operation Sovereign Borders*.” *Geoforum* 58 (May 2014).

## *Inhospitable Terrain*

In his work on the U.S.-Mexico border, Joseph Nevins defined the borderlands as a “space of death.”<sup>19</sup> Above, I linked this space to the Foucauldian formulation of biopolitics as the power “to make live and to let die.” In the *Border Spectacle*, making live and letting die are closely intertwined, not least because the same policies and practices that “rescue” migrants also imperil them. IOM’s Missing Migrants Project estimates that over 40,000 people died attempting to cross a border between 2014 and 2020, primarily from causes like drowning, dehydration, starvation, exhaustion, and hypothermia.<sup>20</sup> These deaths are the hallmarks of these “deterrence” policies – deaths in which seemingly “natural” hazards like sun and ocean water occlude the policies that deliberately exposed migrants to those dangers. For example, the American “Prevention through Deterrence” program has made urban crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border unviable, impelling migrants towards deserts with rugged terrain and extreme temperatures. Likewise, the increased armed surveillance of sea routes to Europe and Australia has compelled migrants towards increasingly dangerous crossings. The homepage of Australia’s Operation Sovereign Borders website is dominated by a single image: a photograph of tumultuous seas and sky, superimposed with an illustration of a boat being turned around and sent back into a storm.<sup>21</sup> As a result of these policies, thousands of migrants have drowned when their crafts foundered on rocky coasts or capsized trying to avoid patrols. The supposedly humanitarian aspect of the

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Remaking of the U.S. – Mexico Boundary*. (London: Routledge, 2001)

<sup>20</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Missing Migrants Project: Tracking Deaths Along Migratory Routes.” <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

<sup>21</sup> Australian Government, “Operation Sovereign Borders,” <https://osb.homeaffairs.gov.au/>. Accessed February 2021.

Border Spectacle – “rescue” patrols – only exacerbate this risk by adding to the hazards that migrant-bearing crafts must circumnavigate.

The *locations* of these deaths – determined by border policing programs – produce corpses who can and will not be seen. In the desert, climate and animal scavengers (combined with the lack of organized recovery efforts) make it almost impossible to find and identify the dead. The Undocumented Migration Project found that within three weeks, corpses in the Sonoran Desert are decomposed and scavenged by coyotes, vultures, and even domestic dogs. Corpses are stripped to skeletons and disarticulated, making them impossible to count.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, IOM representatives report that it is “impossible to know” how many migrants die while attempting to cross the Sahara, since sandstorms swallow up the bodies. Although the US Border Patrol maintains *some* counts of migrant deaths, they only count those corpses which are found close to the border.<sup>23</sup> They also exclude any skeletal remains which cannot be dated – a common problem, in the desert.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the interplay between the *location* of the border and the *policies* used to administer it serves a powerful and deliberate role in rendering migrants’ deaths invisible. The same is true of migrants who die during sea crossings. Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering estimate that for every drowned migrant whose corpse washes up on a Mediterranean

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<sup>22</sup> Jess Beck *et al.*, “Animal Scavenging and Scattering and the Implications for Documenting the Deaths of Undocumented Border Crossers in the Sonoran Desert.” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 60.1 (2015): S11-S20.

<sup>23</sup> Some states do not maintain *any* record of border casualties. Australia, for example, explicitly does not maintain any record of those who die while trying to reach the country.

<sup>24</sup> Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering. *Globalization and Borders: Death at the Global Frontier*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 48. Weber and Pickering also note that Border Patrol discounts any remains they believe belong to smugglers, which raises additional questions about how migrants are categorized, criminalized, and rendered invisible after death. It is unclear how Border Patrol would determine that, for example, a few bleached bone fragments and a belt buckle, belong to a smuggler.

beach, *three* bodies are never recovered.<sup>25</sup> But in some respects, the higher burden of invisibility falls on migrants who are intercepted at sea and turned back – often at gunpoint – towards the very places from which they fled. This kind of invisibility is clearly modeled in the UNHCR’s nomenclature for this practice, which they refer to in reports as “rescued/intercepted.”<sup>26</sup> This language, which reflects the ostensible humanitarianism of border control, is used uniformly across all cases of interception, effectively insisting that every thwarted migrant has been “rescued.” By collapsing interception and rescue, the UNHCR is able to describe situations in which migrants may have been sent to their deaths as “rescue.” Acts of violence are transformed into acts of heroism and humanitarianism, and the border’s violence seems to vanish – vanishing migrants’ deaths along with it.<sup>27</sup>

### **Refusing Border Violence**

Border violence thus renders migrant lives – and deaths – invisible in multiple ways: reading migrant bodies as presumptively illegal and therefore disposable, evoking a spectacle of humanitarianism and “rescue,” and mobilizing self-effacing forms of violence. Migrants and their allies have developed strategies of resistance which directly challenge these forms of violence. While different theorists have categorized these strategies in different ways, an important strand in the literature focuses on making claims through disruption. The particular

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<sup>25</sup> Weber & Pickering, *Globalization and Borders*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> The EU refers to these operations as “push backs.” For a critique of the “push back” concept, see the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights glossary: <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/glossary/push-back/>

<sup>27</sup> These “rescue” operations also provide a crucial justification for expanding sovereign power at sea. As Polly Pallister-Wilkins described it in her study of search and rescue operations at sea, in these operations “the humanitarian imperative to rescue and the Safety of Life at Sea directive expands the space of operations and intervention into international waters, meaning that boats can now be intercepted in international waters.” Polly Pallister-Wilkins, “Humanitarian borderwork: actors, spaces, categories” in “Interventions on the state of sovereignty at the border,” by R. Jones *et al.*, *Political Geography* 59 (2017): 6.

value of disruption is clear from the brief sketch of border violence I offered above: migrants, perhaps especially refugees and asylum-seekers, are persistently figured by “receiving” states as apolitical. Border policing works to render asylum-seekers as utterly passive recipients of humanitarian care, incapable of citizenship or political activity.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, the very choice to undertake political action *as* a migrant is an act of resistance and disruption, even if the disruption is fleeting. Analyzing temporary and elusive modes of migrant resistance that she witnessed in Tanzania, Spain, and Australia, Heather Johnson argued for close attention to “momentary activism” as a better analytic lens to “capture eruptions of non-citizen political agency in ways that profoundly challenge and shape societal structures – even if for only a moment.”<sup>29</sup> Momentary activism bursts onto the scene of politics, and then sometimes disappears. Even if these acts do not produce lasting *instrumental* effects, Johnson suggests we must attend to the ways in which these eruptions nevertheless reshape the possibilities of the political. Even fleeting defiances proves that challenges are possible and creates openings for further contestation. Nevzat Soguk offers another way of thinking about sites of migrant resistance which he names as *insurrectional* politics.<sup>30</sup> Insurrectional politics, he writes, have a

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<sup>28</sup> For one reading of this relationship, see: Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

<sup>29</sup> Heather Johnson, “Moments of solidarity, migrant activism and (non)citizens at global borders: Political agency at Tanzanian refugee camps, Australia detention centres and European borders.” in *Citizenship, Migrant Activism, and the Politics of Movement*, eds. Peter Nyers & Kim Rygiel. (London: Routledge, 2014): 123.

<sup>30</sup> Nevzat Soguk, “Border’s Capture: Insurrectional Politics, Border-Crossing Humans, and the New Political” in *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge*, eds. Prem Kumar Rajaram & Carl Grundy-Warr. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2007). Soguk develops his idea of insurrectional politics in dialogue with Etienne Balibar’s “insurrectional democracy,” as described in “Outlines of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence.” For Balibar, insurrectional democracy is characterized by *isonomia* (equality in rights) rather than by exclusionary borders which limit access to rights.

radically democratic character. Participating in this democracy – which is more democratic than the statist version – “affords all migrants a real, even if vulnerable, agency in shaping the conditions of their displacement.”<sup>31</sup> It is participation itself, the act of engaging in politics, which unlocks this possibility. These frameworks for understanding migrant resistance – as momentary, as insurrectional, and as potential acts of citizenship – are all responsive to the ways in which migrant resistance is shaped by the conditions and limits that border violence imposes. They draw attention to the diverse and non-normative forms that migrant resistance must take, and push us to ask what resources migrants might mobilize for political action in systems which deny them capital, representation, and standing. In other words, this context draws attention the political actions that work on and through the body – the resource that remains available when all other political tools are foreclosed. Self-immolation is jarring and disruptive; spectacular but fleeting. Interpreted as an act of migrant counterconduct that is momentary and insurrectional, we can theorize self-immolation in relation to border violence and its attendant politics of visibility as a method which forces open space for political action that has otherwise been denied and makes use of the limited resources which are available to migrants. Self-immolations project migrants’ suffering bodies to the “mainland.” They disrupt the spatial and temporal assignment of migrants as “elsewhere” or “outside.” Self-immolators position themselves in front of audiences, demanding that their pain be witnessed and acknowledged. In doing so, self-immolation *manifests* the violence of the border. It refuses attempts to define migrants’ bodies as illegal and therefore disposable, and translates hidden suffering into modes of pain which demand to be witnessed.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 206

Migrant self-immolators are explicit about both their participation in this politics of visibility and their awareness of the constraints on their options for political action. The case of Khodayar Amini, a Hazara Afghan asylum-seeker who self-immolated in Australia during a video call with the organization Refugee Right Action in 2015, exemplifies these practices. While Amini's self-immolation does not belong to the "set" of cases on which I am focused here (it was not addressed to the UNHCR), it was relatively well-documented because of RRA's involvement. As a result, his case is helpful for identifying the features of a prospective relationship between migrant self-immolations and the border's politics of visibility.

The night before his self-immolation, Amini sent a message to RRA in which he expressed the hope that his story would push people to "stand up for the rights of refugees and stop people being killed just because they have become refugees." But importantly, he did not frame his self-immolation as only a call for attention to refugee rights. It was also explicitly an attempt to make administrative violence against refugees visible. Before setting himself alight, Amini repeatedly told RRA staff that the uncertainty of his legal status was "killing him." He implicated immigration authorities in his death, saying that they "treated [him] in the most cruel and inhumane way, they violated [his] basic human right and took away [his] human dignity." The harms of his uncertain legal status, which he argued was "killing him," left no visible evidence on his body. By self-immolating before an audience, Amini could demand that the "cruel and inhumane" treatment he had experienced be witnessed. Even more specifically, he named three of his friends and fellow asylum-seekers whose deaths he attributed to the migration system, and whose deaths had been rendered invisible: Nasim Najafi, Reza Rezayee and Ahmad Ali Jaffari. Najafi and Jaffari both died in Australian detention centers after staff ignored their complaints of chest pains. RRA staff reported that Rezayee had committed suicide by jumping in

front of a train three months before Amini's self-immolation. His death was apparently not reported by the Australian authorities.<sup>32</sup> The contrast between Amini's death and Rezayee's in particular is telling: although both men took their own lives in a relatively public fashion, Amini's was the subject of public discussion and media coverage, where Rezayee's went unseen. The spectacle of self-immolation allows for modes of staging that enabled Amini to convey political claims through his death – claims his friends were unable to make.

The circumstances of Amini's self-immolation highlight the intentionality of staging that characterizes these acts. Before his death, Amini was in hiding, fearful that the state would deny him papers or deport him. Despite this, he staged his self-immolation to maximize its visibility: because he planned to die, he could act without fear of reprisal. This decision created the space for political action. He effectively broadcast his self-immolation, producing a kind of public spectacle. In doing so, he deliberately invoked two kinds of audience-communities: first, he summoned the memory of the border's unseen dead by naming his friends. Second, he (quite literally) summoned an audience of sympathetic observers by placing his video call to RRA. His death took time, and by broadcasting this protracted agony Amini offered sympathetic audiences a unified image of migrant suffering that explicitly embodied the violence that border policing hides and disclaims. Combining this image with his explicit statements of blame and accusation, Amini used his burning body to register not only a condemnation but a *demand*: that audiences see and reckon with border violence and its dead. In making this demand, he also asserted his status as a political subject over and against the depoliticizing label of "refugee."

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<sup>32</sup> Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, "Asylum-seeker Khodayar Amini feared dead in Australia after 'setting himself alight' during video call." *Independent*. October 19, 2015.

Analyzing protest slogans from the Spring 2006 demonstrations across the United States, Anne McNevin concluded that migrant resistance was shifting towards a strategy based in:

[an] open display of collective confidence...no longer avoiding scrutiny and pleading for inclusion from a position of little leverage, irregular migrants now *demand* recognition of their social and economic contribution and their pre-existing rights as political subjects.<sup>33</sup>

We might read Amini's self-immolation (and other migrant self-immolations) as part of this lineage, despite the significant differences in method. Like the mass demonstrations McNevin described, his act was fundamentally grounded in an act of revelation – an “open display” which demanded recognition by revealing, rather than hiding, his vulnerability.<sup>34</sup> The demand to be seen that emerges from these strategies is not just a matter of visibility (i.e., of revealing the unseen), but a demand to be seen *as* valuable and as capable of political action. This demand, I suggest, is precisely what is at stake in migrant counterconducts. By engaging in counterconduct, migrant self-immolators enact their status as political subjects. In the section that follows, I bring these threads together: combining my analysis of political self-immolations with theories of border violence and migrant resistance, I offer a possible model for thinking about migrant self-immolations as a set or pattern.

### **Reading the Bodies: Migrant Self-Immolation at the United Nations**

The UNHCR is a recurring target for migrant resistance and demands. It is the face of the border's administrative violence – the material manifestation of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy,

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<sup>33</sup> Anne McNevin, “Irregular migrants, neoliberal geographies and spatial frontiers of ‘the political’.” *Review of International Studies* 33 (2007): 667. McNevin frames migrant resistance in terms of political belonging. Adapting the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, McNevin argues that irregular migrants' demands are sites of “the political,” which is to say that they are sites of “radical questioning of what it means to belong.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 672. As McNevin explains it, “it is precisely that vulnerability to legitimised acts of arrest, detention, and deportation that makes the notion of irregular migrants as rights-bearing claimants so intrinsically challenging to prevailing frameworks of political belonging.”

lengthy delays, and profound uncertainty of the asylum process. Self-immolation has been part of the multifaceted protests undertaken by those who have attempted to call the UN to account for its role in this system. I focus on this subset of cases not because I believe them to be either exceptional or paradigmatic, but because “controlling” this one “variable” affords us a more concrete site for analysis (which is crucial, given the slipperiness of the subject). The self-immolators in these cases indicated that the UNHCR was their “target audience,” both verbally and through staging (i.e., through positioning their bodies near UNHCR spaces or timing their acts to coincide with visits from UNHCR representatives).<sup>35</sup> I focus on three specific cases, all of which took place between 2016 and 2020. I have chosen these cases for the availability of video footage and interviews with fellow asylum-seekers who were willing to comment on motivations and reception. While these sources are imperfect, they do offer some insights on which we might – however provisionally – build.

In April 2016, an Iranian asylum-seeker eventually identified as Omid Masoumali self-immolated during a visit from UNHCR representatives. Masoumali had been detained on the eight-square-mile Pacific Island of Nauru (where Australia warehouses many asylum-seekers detained at sea) for three years. Although he been formally classified as a refugee, he had not been released from detention. Cellphone footage shows him drenched in petrol and standing alone, with UNHCR staff uniforms clearly visible in the background.<sup>36</sup> Before igniting, he

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<sup>35</sup> Other United Nations offices have “hosted” self-immolations as well. For example, in 2009 a 26-year-old Tamil immigrant from Sri Lanka, Murugathasan Varnakulasingham, self-immolated outside the United Nations complex to bring attention to the Sri Lankan government’s most recent offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its extremely high costs of civilian life. Sam Jones, “Tamil killed himself ‘to guide others to liberation.’” *The Guardian*. February 18, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Doherty & Davidson, “Self-immolation.” For its part, the UNHCR has condemned Australia’s border control system as inhumane and unlawful on a number of occasions, including in the aftermath of the Spring 2016 self-immolations at Nauru.

declared: “This is how tired we are. This action will prove how exhausted we are.”<sup>37</sup> His description of migrants as “tired” and “exhausted” recalls the kinds of quiet, difficult to represent pain I associated with self-immolation above: tiredness is a slow, grinding pain without obvious external cause. Masoumali was explicitly responding to this problem of visibility when he declared that his death would concretely display the migrant detainees’ suffering. His self-immolation leveraged the temporal disjuncture which characterizes self-immolation: it transformed slow and silent suffering into spectacular, screaming agony. After three years of detention, of waiting helplessly for slow bureaucratic wheels to turn, his ignition demanded frenzy. It compelled immediate response.

Importantly, Masoumali did not simply aspire to *show* migrants’ pain, but to “prove” it. In denying migrants’ political agency, border violence also denies their knowledge or authority as speaking subjects. Miriam Ticktin’s ethnographic work observing a Refugee Appeals Board located outside of Paris aptly illustrates this process at work, with judges asking asylum-seekers to produce medical certificates to substantiate their claims of torture and to recite detailed accounts of the names and locations of detention centers that could be crosschecked against state records. Her informant frankly divulged that the panel denied applications based on their personal impressions of the politics and histories of the countries the applicants had fled. Decisions were based on the judges’ opinions, considered more authoritative than the asylum-seekers’ experiences, and the awareness that decisions “can always be supported by the law after the fact.”<sup>38</sup> While administrators’ feelings are transfigured into facts, the lives, experiences, and

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<sup>37</sup> Austin Ramzy, “Refugee Held on Nauru Dies After Self-Immolation to Protest Australian Policy.” *New York Times*. April 29, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011): 136

needs of asylum-seekers are effaced as meaningless. Masoumali's claim that his self-immolation could serve as proof, as conclusive evidence of his suffering which required no external legitimation, can therefore also be considered an assertion of political agency in rebuke to a system which denied migrant's capacity to speak with authority about their own experiences.

In April 2020, Syrian refugee Bassam Al-Hallaq (sometimes rendered as "Al-Hallak") self-immolated in Lebanon, with the video of his self-immolation circulating widely online in the following days.<sup>39</sup> Several news sources ran an interview with one of Al-Hallaq's sons, Haitham, regarding his father's circumstances and corresponding motivations. Haitham reported that their family had been denied aid "because [they] did not live in a tent" in a refugee camp, but instead shared a rented home. Haitham insisted that what drove his father to self-immolate was "dignity" and "honor of the soul," which made him unwilling to move into the camp (which he believed, inaccurately, was necessary to receive aid).<sup>40</sup> To make sense of this self-immolation, we might consider it in relation to the spatial politics of the refugee camp. The camp enacts refugee status's denial of political agency in the most literal fashion, by controlling and demobilizing refugee bodies and making them fully subject to the mandates of the aid-providing organization. Analyzed through the lens of the Border Spectacle (with overt violence and humanitarianism operating in tandem), I suggest that Al-Hallaq may have perceived himself to be caught between two impossible options: to give up his agency by submitting to the refugee camp, or to give up

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<sup>39</sup> Dima Abumaria, "Self-immolation Shows Despair of Refugees in Lebanon." *The Media Line*. April 6, 2020

<sup>40</sup> "Bassam, who was burned with 'the honor of himself' *Saudi 24 News*. April 6, 2020. Dignity and honor are both slippery political concepts, with contested definitions. However, adjudicating the precise definitions of these terms is unimportant for my purposes, particularly because these terms are offered in translation and I have not been able to find the original language. Instead, I rely on the (admittedly vague) common usages: that dignity and honor are desirable signs of strength (internal or external), and that they play some role in constituting both individual and collective humanity.

his agency by submitting to the slow, wasting death promised by abject poverty. Labeling Al-Hallaq's self-immolation as an act of "dignity" or "honor of the soul," as his son proposed, calls out the political impossibility of these two options: submission to either option required submitting to being a body disallowed political action – a body that was an object, not a subject, of power. Self-immolation presented a third option: choosing defiance over submission and maintaining political agency by indicting the UN for its failures. It constituted, in effect, a refusal to die quietly.

Fellow refugees analyzed his death along these lines, attributing it to the UNHCR's insufficient aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Asked about his father's motivations, Al-Hallaq's other son, Issam, lamented to interviewers, "We would contact the UN, and they would tell us you're not qualified – you're not qualified for any aid."<sup>41</sup> When asked about the circumstances surrounding Al-Hallaq's death, one fellow refugee insisted that the UNHCR had "stopped aid for many refugees after determining that the budget could not cover them all."<sup>42</sup> This shortfall was particularly disastrous since the combined pressures of the Lebanese financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the economic sectors available to refugees and thereby exacerbated their reliance on aid. Following this thread, we might read Al-Hallaq's death as both a product and a refusal of the UNHCR's mandate to both manage and care for refugees. At the very least, it is clear that after Al-Hallaq's death other Syrian refugees invoked his example as an indictment of the UNHCR's policies, and as the material manifestation of the organization's

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<sup>41</sup> Abby Sewell, "Syrian refugee in Lebanon sets himself on fire over dire economy amid coronavirus." *Al-Arabiya News (English)*. April 6, 2020. The UNHCR, for their part, denied this allegation.

<sup>42</sup> Abumaria, "Self-immolation Shows Despair"

failure. The invocation and memory of his death became a political tool which fellow migrants sought to leverage.

Perhaps the case that most clearly highlights the potentially utility of reading these incidents through their relationship to border violence took place in Cairo, Egypt. In 2016, at least two Oromo migrants fleeing Ethiopia through Egypt self-immolated after months of camping outside the UNHCR's offices in Cairo to protest the long wait times for refugee status determination (RSD) interviews and the large proportion of applications which were rejected.<sup>43</sup> The forty Oromos camped outside the UNHCR offices were the remnants of a protest nearly 300-strong.<sup>44</sup> The delay in RSD decisions created an intensely precarious situation for migrants who found themselves targets of violence from local Egyptians, hounded for money they did not have by their former smugglers, and ignored by police who took no interest in their well-being. Indeed, the very language of "status determination" (no matter the sympathies of the speaker) emphasizes this precarity by naming migrants based on what they lack: they have no status, nor do they have the capacity to claim any status for themselves under the law. After two weeks of negotiations between UNHCR staff and Oromo community leaders led to an agreement, most of

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<sup>43</sup> I say "at least two" because I have only found news coverage documenting the joint self-immolation of two individuals. I have not been able to find any news coverage, including of the broader protest, after this date. However, given the large number of asylum-seekers who had initially agreed to self-immolate, it is possible that more self-immolations followed.

<sup>44</sup> This was not the first migrant protest to target UNHCR offices in Egypt. In 2005, over 3,000 Sudanese migrants staged a three-month occupation at the park across from the offices, released a series of written "requests" which named their collective group as "the Sudanese refugees," and jointly administered daily life. In other words, the protestors both usurped the UNHCR's power of determination and, simultaneously, demonstrated a capacity for mutual care that exceeded the kinds of care available through UNHCR aid. Carolina Moulin and Peter Nyers described this sit-in as "assert[ing] a claim on who has the status of a speaking being." Similar questions were at play during the 2016 protests. Carolina Moulin and Peter Nyers. "We Live in a Country of UNHCR' – Refugee Protests and Global Political Society." *International Political Sociology* 1 (2007): 363.

the protesters dispersed. But those who remained redoubled their efforts: of the forty asylum-seekers at the camp, thirty-three agreed to self-immolate if they were denied refugee status (a near certainty) and pooled their money to buy a container of gas for accelerant. The protestors described themselves as facing an impossible choice. As one asylum-seeker described the situation, “We have come to feel in Cairo, it is Europe or death!”<sup>45</sup> As possibilities for reaching Europe appeared to dwindle, so too did the possibilities for action shift: the asylum-seekers were now faced with a choice between different kinds of deaths. Members of the protesting group were explicit about the value of dying on the UNHCR’s doorstep, including those who did not join the self-immolation pact. For example, one asylum-seeker (who abstained from the agreement because she was the sole caretaker for four children) told reporters: “If you have problems and there are no solutions, it’s better to die.” But despite these bleak conditions, I propose that we might read these deaths as engaged in political work beyond that of resignation or hopelessness. In the wake of these two deaths, the protestors did not abandon their efforts, either by dispersing or by self-immolating *en masse*. On the contrary, they continued to squat outside the UNHCR building. They incorporated the self-immolations into their protests by circulating video footage throughout the community and speaking freely with reporters who were drawn to cover the protests after the self-immolations. They reiterated that the UNHCR’s neglect was the source of their plight, and that the UNHCR alone owed them redress. These are not necessarily the actions of people who have given into despair, but perhaps of those who are seeking new tactics in the face of previous failures.

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<sup>45</sup> Stephan Grey and Amina Ismail. “In Cairo, Ethiopia’s Oromos lose hope with U.N. refugee agency.” *Reuters*. December 6, 2016.

If there is documentation on how other members of the Oromo migrant community received these self-immolations, I have been unable to find it. This lack of data presents a real challenge for evaluating the work of these protests. However, I suggest that (as with the case of Al-Hallaq in Lebanon), thinking spatially offers one strategy for making sense of these self-immolations. Choosing to die at the UN's doorstep is a profound refusal to be removed: self-immolation is not only spectacular, it is also final. It is an act that does not allow for rebuttal, and thereby empowers individuals usually denied the capacity for political speech to instead have the "last word." In doing so, it shifts the balance of power between the protestors and the UNHCR.

Through self-immolation the Oromo asylum-seekers were also empowered to compel the UNHCR to *wait*, reversing (however briefly) the dynamic in which asylum-seekers wait years for a status determination. Following the self-immolations, the Cairo UNHCR offices were closed for three days, with an additional week-long suspension in the review of RSD decisions for Ethiopian asylum-seekers. From an instrumental perspective, further delaying the RSD process may seem contrary to the asylum-seekers' goals. But it is important to resist the urge to reduce self-immolation to these instrumental goals. Instead, we must ask what it means to wait for an RSD interview: to be subject entirely to the international border management system not only for the necessities of survival but also for a *status determination*. This waiting period entails waiting to be granted *subjecthood*; to be made a subject entitled to rights and obligations from the international community. The implication of this relation is that the asylum-seeker has no agency or grounds from which to make demands. Even when an asylum-seeker gains access to an RSD interview, their scope of agency is constrained by the UNHCR's pre-approved "country of origin information." In this scenario, the UNHCR does not only control the asylum-seeker's status, but also the production of knowledge *about* the asylum-seeker. The RSD process thereby

undercuts the asylum-seeker's capacity to know and to speak. I alluded to this problem above, in conjunction with Omid Masoumali's insistence that he could "prove" migrants' pain: asylum-seekers are regularly denied the capacity to contribute to the economy of knowledge about their own lives and histories. Even though the Ethiopian government's abuse of Oromos is generally acknowledged by the UN, and even though individual asylum-seekers may have claims that fit known patterns, the use of "country of origin" information to assess claims provides unlimited cover for denying asylum claims without explanation. Indeed, in her ethnographic work Ticktin found that French officials sometimes denied asylum-seeker's claims *because* they aligned too closely with known stories of abuse.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the process of authorization becomes a process of denying migrants' agency. Affecting the operations of the UNHCR office – even by halting them – disrupts the relationship whereby agents of border policing control access to subjecthood, and within which the asylum-seeker appears only insofar as they are able to precisely conform to the system's pre-existing knowledge. Dying on the grounds of the UNHCR creates, however provisionally, a relationship of parity or even symmetry. In dying, the self-immolators could make a claim to authority. By extension, they made a claim to membership which actively works against the state of indeterminacy, implying that despite their lack of formal status they *still* had a claim to refuge. It denies the UNHCR's status as the sole authority empowered to evaluate and validate asylum-seekers' pain and, as in the case of Masoumali, insists that migrants have the authority to represent themselves.

The literature on political self-destruction offers a way of interpreting the group decision to self-immolate outside the UNHCR building that is aligned with this perspective. K.M. Fierke describes this kind of practice as "acting as if." As Fierke explains it, "Acting as if" one is free

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<sup>46</sup> Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 137.

can be understood as a performance that contributes to the construction of a new set of rules and practices.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, in taking their own lives these asylum-seekers are able to act *as if* they were not dependent upon the UNHCR’s status determination. From this perspective, asylum-seekers who self-immolate end the process of waiting for a status determination, and in fact refuse the idea that they *need* a status determination in order to be political subjects. Enacting this claim through self-immolation makes the performance a kind of reality. It not only rejects the UNHCR’s rules of refugee status determination but creates new “rules and practices” in their stead. Self-immolation offers these migrants a way to validate their claims without mediation or external legitimation; to assert themselves as political subjects who do not need anyone else’s authorization to appear and to act.<sup>48</sup> As one asylum-seeker bluntly described it, “Rather than return back to Ethiopia to die, we decided it would be better for us to die here.”<sup>49</sup> Although the outcome is death in either case, it is clear that the protestors understood there to be a substantive difference between *choosing* death, and passively awaiting it. The decision to die – or more specifically, to determine one’s own death – wrests the power over life and death away from the UNHCR. In other words, self-immolation stakes a claim to political agency that transcends the UNHCR’s authority – even if it does so in a way that forecloses the future exercise of that agency.

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<sup>47</sup> K.M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 227

<sup>48</sup> This is precisely what Peter Nyers argued “acts of citizenship” might offer to non-status migrants. He argued that using “the strategy of interruption,” migrants undertaking political action were “enacting themselves as citizens even when the law does not recognize them as such.” Peter Nyers, “No One Is Illegal Between City and Nation.” in *Acts of Citizenship*. eds. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen. (London; New York: Zed Books, 2008): 179.

<sup>49</sup> Chalaine Chang, “In Egypt, Oromo Asylum Seekers Desperate Enough to Self-Immolate.” *The New Humanitarian*. (September 12, 2016)

## The Stakes of Being Seen

By 2021, another cluster of migrant self-immolations began to coalesce: migrants trapped in Greece are increasingly turning towards a politics of self-destruction, as Greek officials (both supported and threatened by the European Union) have ramped up their efforts to expel and turn back asylum-seekers.<sup>50</sup> In February 2021, an Afghani woman held in a camp on the island of Lesbos attempted to self-immolate by setting fire to her tent. Sitting inside her burning tent, she expressed the desire to die as neighbors dragged her out of the flames. The woman was charged with arson, on the grounds that her tent was government property. A spokesman for Greek police argued, in response to criticisms, that “The law has to be enforced...A message has to be sent.”<sup>51</sup> This move to prosecute can be read as a particularly bleak sign of things to come for migrants stranded in Greece, particularly in light of the harsh conditions frequently applied to migrants who attempt to “cheat the system” by choosing death over prolonged detention. But when read in terms of border policing’s politics of visibility, these twin claims – “the law has to be enforced” and “a message has to be sent” – may contain more than a vague threat: in the prosecution of the self-immolator, we can see an attempt to bring the self-immolator back under control by veiling the image of migrant-as-political-agent under the shroud of migrant-as-criminal.

As of January 2022, I can find only one update on the case, posted by a Greek migrants’ rights organization. The woman and her family were transferred to Germany in September 2021 – with the criminal charges against her still pending.<sup>52</sup> Although multiple news outlets reported

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<sup>50</sup> Migrant self-immolations are not new to Greece. For example, in March 2016, multiple migrants self-immolated in a makeshift camp in Idomeni, near the Greece-Macedonia border, in protests against the newly-signed European Union-Turkey agreement to expel migrants from Europe and return them to Turkey.

<sup>51</sup> Niki Kitsantonis, “Refugee Who Set Herself on Fire in Greece is Charged With Arson.” *New York Times*. February 25, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Legal Centre Lesvos. “Latest News.” <https://legalcentrelesvos.org>. Accessed January 2022.

the self-immolation attempt and even the Greek government's decision to prosecute, I have found no record in the English-language media of the outcome. The case has vanished from public view, like the lives and deaths of so many migrant self-immolators before. The disappearance of this case – with its potentially catastrophic consequences for migrants protesting mistreatment in Greece and beyond – underscores the importance of recognizing migrant self-immolations as a category of political action worthy of attention and analysis. If these actions were tracked, examined, and analyzed together by a wider audience, it might impede these disappearances. Regarding migrant self-immolations as a meaningful group or category – taking place across different sites and utilized by diverse groups – opens possibilities for recording, reckoning with, and responding to them. It does not follow, from treating these actions as a set or cluster, that all migrant self-immolators have the same circumstances, motivations, or goals. This article sketches out a possible model for analysis, illustrating how – even with the sparse and partial data presently available – reading migrant self-immolations together might enable us to see important relationships between modes of border violence and the methods deployed to resist them. Thus, while the analysis I propose here is provisional, the stakes of recognizing migrant self-immolations as connected are quite concrete: in seeing migrant self-immolation as a widespread mode of political action, we can refuse to allow border violence to pass unseen and unremarked, reject the classification of migrant bodies as criminal and disposable, and insist on the legibility of acts of migrant resistance over and against the forces that refuse to recognize them.