

## **Hunger Power: The embodied protest of the political hunger strike<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*An enduring form of protest, the hunger strike features in numerous historical and contemporary political and social movements. Yet its simple denial of food is belied by its numerous contradictions. Undertaken by those denied voice it nevertheless can be extremely powerful. It deftly interiorises the violence of the opponent within the body of the protester, affirming and undermining the protest simultaneously. It can be undertaken for highly strategic and rational reasons and yet it is often affective because of the emotional response it provokes.*

*This paper attends to the hunger strike, focusing upon the three historical examples of political activism provided by the Suffragette, Irish republican and anti-apartheid movements. In particular, it highlights three political aspects of the hunger strike: 1) the facilitation of non-verbal communication 2) the embodiment of collective identifications 3) the disruption of the dominant order. The paper considers how the hunger strike challenges the omission of the body from political theory, displaying the body to be both political instrument and political actor. It also challenges the prioritisation of deliberative discussion over embodied protest.*

**Key Words:** Hunger, embodiment, bodies, politics, protest, violence, collective identification, non-rational.

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*'Hunger strikes... are very much about power. It's the attempt of powerless people to exert some power over their circumstances, and states don't like -- governments don't like people contesting their power, particularly if they're prisoners who they want to have complete control over... Part of the point of imprisoning people is to have control over their bodies, and the last thing the administration wants is for the detainees to take that power back.'*

Fran Lisa Buntman <sup>2</sup>

*'Hunger felt like a bundle of washing hanging inside me'*

Dan Zwelonke Mdluli

*'It was a surreal game of poker, and the stakes were people's lives'*

Bernadette Devlin McAliskey<sup>3</sup>

## **Introduction**

A hunger strike embodies numerous contradictions. A simple and sustained refusal of food, a spectacle of frailty, it yet wields devastating violence. The painful impact of the strike, however, is not pointed directly towards the enemy, but inverts itself towards the body of the one who is making the protest, necessarily weakening the very ground that sustains it. Often undertaken by those utterly desperate, it can nevertheless appear extreme, a futile suffering only to be terminated by the death it beckons. And while it is undertaken for sharply pragmatic reasons, it is so precisely for the visceral response it elicits. It is unsurprising, then, that the hunger strike is a topic of fascination, attracting investigation from various angles; biological and psychological investigations (Fessler, 2003); historical accounts (Sweeney, 1993; Vernon, 2007) anthropological, sociological and cultural study (Andriolo, 2006; Ellman, 1993; Russell, 2005, Simeant, 1998) alongside political analyses (Anderson, 2004 & 2010; Dingley and Mollica, 2007; Feldman, 1991; Koçan and Öncü, 2006; Yuill, 2007). Academic discussion utilises, discusses and connects with participant and witness accounts (Pankhurst, [1959]1987; Naidoo, 2003; O'Rawe, 2005; Morrison, 2006; Doyle, 2011).

This essay considers the hunger strike in terms of the ambiguous yet powerful role it plays in political protest movements, the questions it poses for conventional notions of politics and the way in which it attests to the insights of work on embodiment. In much socio-political thought, the public realm is populated by disembodied figures, who can transcend particularities of race,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2013-05-14/understanding-hunger-strikes-bobby-sands-guantanamo> (accessed 11 December 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in McKay (2008) 95.

gender and ethnicity. But politics is not undertaken by uniform bodies, with identical aims and ideals. Work of feminist theorists reveals how such a putative disembodied neutrality serves to hide the particular types of bodies that dominate within the political realm (Davis, 1997; Grosz, 1994; Pateman, 1989). Relatedly, important research has highlighted the role of the body in social movements. For example, instances of naked protest has been analysed to reveal the possibilities of naked gendered bodies to disrupt political conventions and structures (Sutton, 2007; Tyler, 2013; O’Keefe, 2014).

The hunger striking body reaffirms these critiques through its provocative display of politics simultaneously *by* the body and *on* the body. In contrast to traditional conceptions of politics, the protesting individual is here revealed as importantly embodied. And, in contrast to traditional conceptions of the body as a biologically predetermined and pre-political object, the hunger striking body shows itself to hold potent creativity; it contributes to the political narratives, practices and protests that it is itself constructed by. It is not enough here to reverse the assumption that bodies are biologically fixed, into the suggestion that bodies are always entirely socially constructed. As Barbara Sutton remarks: ‘The body is a key vehicle of protest’ (2007: 143). She notes that the naked body serves as a *political text* (2007: 143). But, the body also serves as a *political actor*; the one who scrawls the text through a self-directed violence. The body is not simply a ‘docile object’ that is passively conditioned or violently constructed; it also creatively contributes to political protest itself (Machin 2015). Political subjectivity, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is always embodied: my body does not transmit undifferentiated sensation but itself creates meaning (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Through the suffering of their bodies individuals experience themselves as political actors, while at the same time such embodied subjectivity uses and constructs its own body as political object.

One does not have to advocate the use of hunger striking, to condemn its dismissal from serious analysis. Although hunger striking is often portrayed as a primitive instrument of backward communities, this depiction is contradicted by its on-going appearance in contemporary protests (for example, in Guantanamo Bay and even more recently in Calais). It is important to understand what role this form of protest plays in numerous historical and contemporary political movements. And yet it is both difficult and problematic to draw any general claims about hunger striking. Particular instances arise within specific historical, social and political contexts and hold a ‘multiplicity of truths’ (Feldman, 1991: 220; Koçan and Öncü, 2006). Its affects are contradictory, ambiguous and unpredictable. I do not, therefore, try to reveal the ‘truth’ of a specific case or to fix the meaning of the hunger strike in general. The claim I do make, however, is that the hunger strike offers a powerful illustration of the body as both political *instrument* and political *actor*.

More particularly, there are three (interconnected) ways in which the body within the hunger strike is politically significant. First, the hungry body draws attention and facilitates *communication* through its performance, which incorporates both rational calculation and non-rational meanings. Waismel-

Manor writes: 'It is time to recognize the hunger strike as a common and legitimate form of collective action – not the act of a crazy individual, but a rational path that follows some deliberation and is based on individuals' socialization and the political action alternatives open to them' (2005: 282). At the same time, however, there are important affective dimension that cannot be fully understood in an account restricted to 'rational' motivations.

One aspect of its communication is the articulation of a political collectivity; its individual sacrifice is both constructed and reproduces a collective *identification*. This is the second political significance of the hunger strike. It may well alienate the political adversary further, but it can strengthen the political 'us'. The 'cause' of the hunger strike is also its *affect*: the collective claims and disciplines the bodies that are symbolically and actively *reproducing* the collective identity. Here national identity intersects with gender identity in contradictory ways: the body in the hunger strike may (re)produce gender, perhaps reaffirming the gender dichotomy but also signalling, for example, the problematic exclusion of women's bodies from the political realm. Hunger striking is particularly potent for women who challenge gender norms through their very protest.

Third, then, the protesting body – in particular the female/feminine protesting body - can *disrupt* the dominant order of the political sphere through the use of self-directed violence. Begona Aretxaga brings to attention: 'the points at which the technology of normalisation breaks down, the moments in which rational disciplines of the body fail to produce docile subjects' (1995: 124). The hunger strike exists in these points. Not only does it radically disorder the conventional disciplining of imprisoned bodies, it also undermines political conventions of prioritising rational deliberative discussion over passionate embodied protest. In summary, then, the hunger striking body *communicates*, *identifies* and *disrupts*.

## **Hunger as protest**

Starvation has many meanings. One can go hungry for different reasons: health, illness, dieting, religion, famine as well as protest (Ellmann, 1993: 4). The impact of lack of food intake upon the body is, biologically, fairly uniform: for the first few days your body uses its stores of glycogen, and then starts breaking down fats. After 20 days, your heart rate and your blood pressure drop rapidly. You feel faint, weak, cold and dizzy. You cannot get out of bed. You may lose your feelings of thirst and hunger and become dehydrated (Peel, 1997). After 40 days, your body starts breaking down protein from unnecessary tissue, such as the muscles in your eyes: 'First you have double vision. Then your sight dims. You vomit green bile. Your speech is slurred. You can't hear very well. You have jaundice. You have scurvy from lack of Vitamin C. Your gums begin to bleed. You may be bleeding into your stomach and intestines' (Russell, 2005: 89). Your body is now quite literally consuming itself. If you are a healthy adult you are given an estimated 60 days to live.

Although the physiological affects of starvation are generalizable, the social impact of different types of starvation is not. The context, motives, status and gender of the person condition the meaning that their hunger is given, by themselves and others. Hunger can connote victimhood. It can also signify power. The extreme suffering and pain undertaken by a hunger striker demonstrates their dedication to the cause as well as their obdurate will and agency. Their body becomes both a weapon and its target. The hunger strike can be a highly significant form of political protest and resistance for those who lack vote, voice and status.

Just as hunger takes numerous forms, so does the hunger strike. The following sections offer a comparative overview of the often conflicting accounts of the hunger strikes by different groups of political activists in the twentieth century: The British suffragettes, the Irish republican prisoners in Belfast and the anti-apartheid prisoners on Robben Island. These examples were chosen because they are all hunger strikes undertaken by an imprisoned group who are part of a broader social movement to challenge and undermine the legitimacy of the state, and thus can illustrate the implications of the individual embodied protest for the collective body. As a spectacle, the reality of the hunger strike exists in its presentation (Passmore, 2009: 37). I investigate the presentation of the hunger-strike, using content analysis of various sources: first hand accounts, academic analysis and journalism that reproduce both the hungry body and the embodied hunger. None of these texts present ‘the truth’. I approach them as offering particular perspectives informed by their own embodied position (as is my own). The analysis shows that the examples share common characteristics but also have important differences.

It is important to note that one crucial commonality between these examples of hunger strikes is that their facts, meaning and interpretation are highly contested. The inevitability of contradiction, ambiguity and lacuna regarding hunger strikes must be acknowledged. Fran Lisa Buntman points out, contradictory accounts are inevitable in any attempt to reconstruct political events that took place, for example, behind prison walls (2003: 53). In her account of political imprisonment on Robben Island she explains that this is not just due to ‘problems of memory or differential experience’ but that ‘gaps and silences in accounts of the past also reflect strategies inherent in the nature of the political process’ (Buntman, 2003: 12). This is why writing an account of a hunger strike is an on-going process that is never complete. With this in mind, I attempt to describe these contested depictions before going on to consider what they might reveal about the role of the hunger striking body in, and for, politics.

### **Irish republicans**

One of the most well-known occurrences of hunger-striking is that of the Irish Republican prisoners in the Long Kesh/Maze Prison near Belfast and Armagh women’s prison during the period of ‘the Troubles’. Long Kesh Prison (later renamed ‘the Maze’) had been built on the old RAF base, in eight separate ‘H’

shaped blocks and accommodated over 10,000 men. The prisoners were nearly exclusively paramilitary prisoners, the majority of which were nationalist, or republican (McAtackney, 2008). Armagh prison was the only female prison in Northern Ireland. Between 1972 and 1976 it housed more than 100 political prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

The Irish republican prisoners held that, as members of the paramilitary organisations the PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) and INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), they were due certain rights as Prisoners of War rather than as criminals (Findlay, 1985). They demanded the political status that had been previously granted to them in 1972 following an earlier hunger strike, but then withdrawn in 1976 as part of a ‘criminalisation’ policy (Bobby Sands Trust 2008).<sup>5</sup> Since then, Republican prisoners at Long Kesh/the Maze had been on a ‘blanket’ protest in which they refused to wear prison uniforms and were given only blankets to cover themselves. The women prisoners in Armagh were allowed to wear their own clothes, but had begun a ‘no-work’ protest (Axetxaga 1995). These protests were then intensified into a ‘dirty’ protest in which the prisoners in both prisons refused to leave their cells to wash themselves and slop out. Instead they smeared the walls with their own faeces: ‘excrement and urine literally became weapons in the war between prisoners and prison officers’ (McKittrick & McVea, 2001: 140). In Armagh, an additional instrument was menstrual blood: ‘under the circumstances, the only weapons the Armagh women had at their disposal were their bodies.... Decorating the cells with menstrual blood was the ultimate act of disruption and empowerment, of women taking control of their bodies to challenge the prison system’ (O’Keefe, 2006: 546; Aretxaga 1995). In a place of documented violence and humiliation, the prisoners turned the suffering onto themselves. Stench, maggots, lice and infections filled the cells (Aretxaga, 1995).

These protests drew publicity but did not win the prisoners the recognition and special status they demanded. On 27<sup>th</sup> October 1980 prisoners in both prisons started a hunger strike, which ended on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> December 1980 amid confusion (McKay, 2008). Suggestions had been made that there would be a concession towards special category status, but this did not occur (Bobby Sands Trust, 2008). On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1981 a new hunger strike began. This time women did not take part and it was staggered: ten republican prisoners in the H-Blocks led by IRA OC Bobby Sands, one after the other, refused food. The decision making behind the strikes is contested. In his account (2005) ‘blanket man’ Richard O’Rawe who was the IRA PRO in the H-Blocks states that the Sinn Fein leadership took crucial decisions and overruled the H-Block leadership inside the prison. This contradicts the ‘official’ version. Nevertheless, in popular imagery at least, this was part of a unified struggle, as articulated in the statement released by the hunger strikers at the beginning of this second strike:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://prisonsmemoryarchive.com/>

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed draft chronology see CAIN webservice: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>

“We the republican POWs in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, and our comrades in Armagh Prison, are entitled to and hereby demand political status, and we reject today as we have consistently rejected every day since September 14th, 1976, when the blanket protest began, the British government’s attempted criminalisation of ourselves and our struggle... Only the loud voice of the Irish people and world opinion can bring them to their senses and only a hunger strike, where lives are laid down as proof of the strength of our political convictions, can rally such opinion and present the British with the problem that, far from criminalizing the cause of Ireland, their intransigence is actually bringing popular attention to that cause... We have asserted that we are political prisoners and everything about our country, our arrest, interrogations, trials and prison conditions, show that we are politically motivated and not motivated by selfish reasons or for selfish ends. As further demonstration of our selflessness and the justness of our cause a number of comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands will hunger strike to the death unless the British government abandons its criminalisation policy and meets our demand for political status” (Bobby Sands Trust 2008).

The strikers had five formal demands, which together would constitute the prisoners receiving a special or political status: 1. The right to wear their own clothes. 2. The right to abstain from prison work. 3. The right to free association. 4. The restoration of all lost remission as a result of the protest. 5. The right to educational and recreational facilities. (Morrison, 2006:16.) The British governments intransigence was epitomised in Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s statement in March 1981: “Crime is crime is crime: it is not political”.<sup>6</sup> The resulting standoff between the prisoners and Thatcher’s Government, in which ten men starved themselves to death captured attention of the media and the public around the world. The strike was eventually ended on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1981 under pressure from relatives of the prisoners, without any of the demands being granted, and apparently without the prisoners being formally given the special political status they had sought. However, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced changes including the granting of the right to wear their own clothes.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of their specific demands then, it may have appeared that the prisoners had been defeated, unable to shirk the criminal status many regarded as entirely accurate (see Mulcahy, 1995). Yet as Patrick Anderson notes in his work on hunger strikes in Turkey, weighing up the ‘success’ of hunger striking demands attention to its wider implications (Anderson, 2004: 821). In the long term the hunger strike seemed to have boosted the republican movement increasing the number of recruits for Sinn Fein and the IRA (McKittrick & McVea, 2001: 147; Aughey & McIlheney, 1981) and provoking an ‘explosion of popular culture’ (Rolston, 1987). From inside the H-Blocks, Bobby Sands won the Fermanagh South Tyrone by-election, seemingly proving political legitimacy of the hunger

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<sup>6</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/4941866.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4941866.stm)

<sup>7</sup> <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/hstrike/chronology.htm>

strikers, illustrating their widespread support and undermining the policy of the British government (Beresford, 1994: 114). His funeral was attended by an estimated 100,000 people.

The hunger strikes were – and continue to be - the object of contradictory accounts. The national press was generally negative and dismissive, constructing the hunger strike as a republican PR stunt that might precipitate violence (Mulcahy, 1995). The interpretation of the Loyalist/Protestant community appears to have been one of suspicion, cold detachment and disgust, in which the hunger strike was the attempt of criminals to legitimize themselves (Brown, 2006: 119; Aughey & McIlheney, 1981). Accounts from Republican/Catholic activists, on the other hand, regard the prisoners with reverence and gratitude. Republicans asked to talk about the hunger strikes lowered their voices ‘their gazes lost in distant space’ (Aretxaga, 1997: 83).

### **Anti-apartheid**

The contestation over the meaning of the Irish Republican hunger strikes, parallels the competing interpretations of those enacted on Robben Island, South Africa. In response to the 1989 hunger strike, the Law and Order Minister Adriaan J. Vlok stated that “The hunger strike is an organized and coordinated attempt to cast the authorities in a bad light and to blackmail them... The state cannot allow itself to be threatened by means of hunger strikes.’ The authorities stated that ‘it does happen from time to time that prisoners go on so-called hunger strikes.’<sup>8</sup> In contrast the hunger strike was regarded by campaigners, as a success in their challenge to the putative absolute power of the state,<sup>9</sup> and their promotion instead of the existence of ‘the power of an apparently powerless group’ (Merrett, 1990).

Under apartheid South Africa, most black male political prisoners who opposed the apartheid regime between 1962-91 were incarcerated in the prison on Robben Island. The prison contained members of various anti-apartheid organisations: the African National Congress (ANC) together with its armed paramilitary wing (Umkhonto we Sizwe or MK) emerged as the largest (Naidoo, 1995). From the 1960’s the rise of legislation designed to suppress anti-apartheid protests and organisations produced a huge number of political prisoners who were sent to the Island. The prison was not just an institution of repression; a ‘brutal hell-hole’ - but was regarded also as a ‘university’. In his letters from Robben Island ANC member Ahmed Kathrada repeatedly mentions his studies, and writes that his mother should think of him as ‘not in jail but at

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<sup>8</sup> John D. Battersby (1989) ‘Hunger Strikes Grow in South Africa Prisons,’ *New York Times*. February 10. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/10/world/hunger-strikes-grow-in-south-africa-prisons.html> (accessed 14 December 2015)

<sup>9</sup> Scott Kraft (1989) ‘Hunger Strike Ends; S. Africa Regime Yields: Government Pledges to Free a ‘Substantial Number’ of Detainees,’ *LA Times*. February 17. Available at: [http://articles.latimes.com/print/1989-02-17/news/mn-2779\\_1\\_hunger-strike](http://articles.latimes.com/print/1989-02-17/news/mn-2779_1_hunger-strike) (accessed 14 December 2015).

university' (2000: 39) It was here that liberation politics were kept alive; paradoxically, then, the prison 'was continually transformed by its political inmates into a site of resistance' (Buntman, 2003: 5). As part of this resistance, hunger striking, Fran Buntman explains, was a 'critical weapon' (Buntman 2003: 58).

Although numbers were important to the hunger strikes by the Irish republicans, they were dwarfed by the numbers hunger striking in South Africa's Robben Island. Just as the Irish republicans had repeated the strategy of hunger striking, so did the H-block shaped prison on Robben Island. In 1966 almost the entire prison population of over 1,000 embarked on a hunger strike (Buntman, 2003: 36). In 1989 a hunger strike involving hundreds of prisoners across South Africa was carried out in protest of indefinite detention without access to a court.<sup>10</sup>

Another difference between the hunger strikes of Robben Island and that of Long Kesh and Armagh, is that the hunger strikes on Robben Island seemed at one level to be more successful in winning their specific demands. In his account of his imprisonment in Robben Island, Indres Naidoo, a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe who was sent to the island in 1963 and was incarcerated there for ten years, describes two hunger strikes. The most significant one, undertaken in 1966, was sparked in reaction to a reduction in rations (already differentiated by race) but more generally reflected the inmates demand that they were acknowledged as political prisoners, as opposed to criminals. There was no respite from manual labour during the hunger strike, although it was relatively short lived; sustained for days rather than weeks: 'During the hours of work, as we slowly raised our hammers and lolled over our stones, we discussed whether it was correct to continue the hunger strike and if so, for how long. Until death? And how would the world know?' (2003: 160) But the hunger strike stopped when the conditions improved. The 1989 hunger strike, too, ended due to the authorities in partial compliance with the demand for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners who had been detailed without trial for opposing apartheid.

What is particularly noticeable about reports of the hunger strikes on Robben Island were how they connected to sense of unity between the prisoners (Naidoo, 1995). The attention captured by the Irish republican hunger strikes came, arguably, from *outside* the prison walls (Feldman, 1991: 230). International attention was indeed focused upon the prison on Robben Island in which many anti-apartheid movement leaders (including Nelson Mandela) were incarcerated (Buntman, 2003: 54). However, it appears that hunger striking in this case was particularly potent in utilising and galvanising solidarity *within* the prison. There were disagreements between various different anti-apartheid groups, but despite this, there was a 'high degree of cross-organizational solidarity and unity' (Buntman, 2003: 87). Thus while Kathrada writes 'the

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/10/world/hunger-strikes-grow-in-south-africa-prisons.html>

general the prison institution is one replete with vulgarity, harshness, violence, filth, corruption, inhumanity' there are also: 'new friends and new relationships, about the need to curb one's individualistic streaks in order to fit into the greater whole, about new responsibilities and new priorities' (2000: 263). He juxtaposes two realities of prison life, one of intolerable deprivation and one of learning, community and solidarity (270). 'Most political prisoners realized... that the enemy was the state embodied in the prison authorities, and that tensions between and among prisoners needed to be resolved or managed to a point where the prisoners could challenge the state in a united front' (Buntman, 2003: 87). On the other hand, as Kathrada notes, Robben Island is where 'ordinary white South Africans' and black prisoners come most into contact; the warders and prisoners frequently converse: 'ironically, it is in jail that we have closest fraternisation between the opponents and supporters of apartheid' (2000: 47). Yet the warders remain 'verkrampptes [supporters of apartheid] and rabid racialists' (48). The solidarity of the prisoners arises as an 'us' against the 'enemy' who have rigidly delineated and enforced the dividing line of race.

### **Suffragettes**

The British suffragettes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century used hunger striking as part of their more radical and militant strategy as compared with constitutional and gradualist strategy of other suffragists. The suffrage movement, composed of many organisations with different strategies and ideologies, was one of flux and overlap, which assertions of clear-cut distinctions between groups tend to obfuscate (Stanley Holton, 1986; Mayhall, 2003). Such complexity was further complicated in other parts of the world, such India and Ireland, in which suffrage movements intersected with – and sometimes contradicted – nationalist and anti-colonialist struggles (Ryan, 1995). Feminism and nationalism may both have been emancipatory movements, but since women played a particular role within nationalism they were often 'locked into traditional roles in the name of national liberation' (Ryan, 1995: 489). While some suffragist organisations worked within the parameters of the law, seeking gradual improvement and engaging with the government in order to achieve enfranchisement, others were focused beyond 'votes for women' (Ryan, 1995: 498). In Britain, one of the most militant and prominent groups (although not all members were militant) was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), set up by the Pankhursts in 1903. The WSPU believed that change had to be sought forcefully with 'hard fighting' (Mayhall, 2003). For them, the government that they had not had any vote in whatsoever, was illegitimate and tyrannical, and they rejected its authority. Following their motto of 'Deeds not Words' they carried out a policy of 'sensational public protest' (Kent 1990). The actions arising from their more aggressive stance ranged from civil disobedience to actual violence including arson, window smashing and stone-throwing. For

Emmeline Pankhurst: 'The argument of the broken pane of glass is the most valuable argument in modern politics'.<sup>11</sup>

Many members of the WSPU were arrested for these activities and jailed. In 1909, Marion Wallace Dunlop was arrested for 'wilful damage' after stencilling on a wall in the British House of Commons the words 'It is the right of the subject to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal'. In Holloway Prison she began a hunger strike (Pankhurst, 1987: 130). This would have 'immense consequences' (Pankhurst, [1959] 1987: 133), marking the start of a hunger strike campaign that would go on until 1914. Imprisoned for the militant acts that they believed they had been forced into, having been denied constitutional means for getting redress for their grievance (Pankhurst, 1913) the Suffragette hunger strikers continued their protest by turning it upon themselves. In response, the government authorised forcible feeding, a violent practice often described by those who experienced it as an extreme and barbaric violation of their bodies; a form of rape (Kent 1990: 199; Purvis 1995). The process was not only painful but dangerous, since food could enter the lungs causing pneumonia (Purvis 1995; 98) The government also introduced, in 1913, 'the Prisoner's Temporary Discharged for Ill-health Act' otherwise known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act' in which prisoners could be released on ill-health grounds and then re-admit them when they had recovered, although sometimes only partially (Purvis 1995; 97). What is strikingly different about the Suffragette hunger campaign, in comparison to those anti-Apartheid and Irish republican movements, is the prolonged time over which hunger striking was repeated in relatively short but painful bursts, in a tedious, torturous game of will with the British government.

WSPU members arrested for demonstrating in Newcastle laid out their position in a letter: 'We shall carry on our protest in Prison. We shall put before the Government by means of the hunger-strike these alternatives; To release us in a few days; to inflict violence on our bodies; to add death to the champions of our cause by leaving us to starve; or – the best and only wise alternative – to give women the vote' (cited in Pankhurst, 1987: 143). They, too, demanded that they were viewed as political, not criminal, prisoners (Kent, 1990: 198). As we have seen, this claim was later echoed by the prisoners in Northern Ireland and on Robben Island.<sup>12</sup> Their militancy and determination was encapsulated in the issuing of a medal by the WSPU to those who had gone on hunger strike, engraved with the words 'for valour'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://womanandhersphere.com/2015/10/16/suffrage-stories-shooting-suffrage-films-that-suffrage-activists-would-have-seen/>

<sup>12</sup> The suffragist movement was closely connected to that of the Irish nationalism (Mayhall, 2003: 4) Some claim that it was the suffragette's hunger strikes that inspired those of the Irish Republicans (Ellmann, 1993: 11; Aretxaga 1997) Early twentieth century hunger strikes in Ireland were first carried out by Irish Suffragettes (Sweeney 1993; 424).

<sup>13</sup> <http://womanandhersphere.com/2012/08/11/collecting-suffrage-the-hunger-strike-medal/>

The suffering of hunger and forced feeding were declared by Christabel Pankhurst to be ‘the price of the vote’ ([1959] 1987: 146). Yet, it seems that it was not solely the vote that the Suffragettes desired. Many of the more ‘constitutionalist’ suffragists were focused upon achieving the vote, but they attempted to achieve this precisely by showing themselves to be unthreatening to the status quo, conforming to female stereotypes, emphasising the ‘womanliness’ of women. More militant suffragettes, however, challenged the beliefs that suggested that women were too irrational and emotional, too prone to hysteria, to be politically enfranchised. Suffragettes sought to redefine what ‘woman’ actually *meant*. In the words of suffragette Mary Richardson: ‘Our suffragette campaign was for much more than ‘Votes for Women’. We were women in revolt, led and financed by women. We were inaugurating a new era for women and demonstrating for the first time in history that women were capable of fighting their battle for freedom’s sake. We were breaking down old senseless barriers...’ (cited in Phillips, 2003: 246). It was not the *extension* of the vote to all women that was the aim of the suffragettes at all, but rather the *breaking down of the barrier* to the vote. ‘In order...to be recognised as individuals qualified to participate in political life, suffragists had, necessarily, to challenge and overturn cultural constructions of femininity and female sexuality.’ (Kent, 1990: 16).

Susan Kingsley Kent notices that the dominant understanding of the public realm as the space for disembodied deliberation immediately excluded women who were associated more closely with the body, and thus were confined to the private sphere: ‘The distinctions between the sexes imposed by society were purported to be those delineated by nature, that the private sphere belonged to woman and the public sphere to men, because of biological and physiological differences between the two.’ (See also Pateman, 1989; Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003). It was this very distinction that the suffragettes challenged. As Louise Ryan notices, some parts of the suffrage movement in Ireland contested the separate sphere distinction by raising in public discussion ‘subjects which were deemed indecent and unsuitable for ‘polite’ conversation, challenging the taboos around topics like child abuse, incest, rape and marital violence’ (1995: 495). Through their hunger striking the suffragettes disrupted the public/private dichotomy in a different way. Wendy Parkins argues that the fact that women were repressed *because of* their bodies was precisely the reason that hunger strike as an embodied protest was so important to the suffragettes. Hunger striking showed the women who undertook it to possess characteristics regarded at the time, and arguably today, to be ‘masculine’ in contrast to ‘feminine’, as ‘disciplined in contrast to ‘disorderly’ as ‘self-controlled’ in contrast to ‘hysterical’ (Parkins, 2000: 68). She writes that suffragist protest was ‘based on the disjuncture between [a woman] as embodied, dissenting female subject and the liberal political subject, construed as rational, deliberative and, by implication, masculine.’ (2000: 70) So it is the very corporeality of hunger striking that made it particularly useful for feminists. Their bodies were what hindered them, and yet they used their bodies to protest. Their statement was doubled up; it proclaimed the injustice of women’s

exclusion from politics and it politicised the body inverting the very ground of exclusion. 'The imprisoned suffragette's refusal to eat announced her willingness to use her body as a political stake and so to contest the cultural construction of the middle-class feminine body as marginal to the realm of politics' (Corbett, 1992: 163).

Mary Jean Corbett considers the importance of 'the ethic of personal renunciation' within the suffragette ideology. She explains that this ethic is oddly indebted to the very system it challenges: Victorian ideas of femininity demanded women to sacrifice themselves for others. 'Victorian women's claims to autonomy had always been rejected on the basis of their prescribed part as the servants of others needs and aims, and even independent women were used to defining themselves in terms of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation.' (1992: 158). Was, she asks, feminine self-sacrifice a patriarchal imposition? Yet the sacrifice of the individual woman through this ethic enabled her to experience herself as a political actor. 'While the suffragette ethic of renunciation represented a revision of Victorian ideology rather than a radical break within it, the opening of a specifically political space of women's altruism and activism enabled women to experience themselves as political and public agents of social transformation.' (1992: 159)

### **The communicating body**

Hunger strikers, deprived not only of vote but also of voice, use their bodies to communicate. Theorists refer to the 'textualisation' of the body in the hunger strike (Ellmann 1993; Feldman 1991: 250). Bodies can be circulated as text (Feldman 1991: 7). The body becomes part of the narrative, or rather as part of various conflicting narratives. On Robben Island, the hunger strike worked *alongside* negotiations with the prison authorities to improve conditions: 'negotiations were used together with other strategies of resistance like hunger strikes for prisoners to achieve their demands' (Buntman 2003: 171).

The body in the hunger strike protest works beneath and between the text too, in its silences. Feldman notices that the corpse can become a 'fundamental unit of communication' (Feldman 1991: 232). The body is inserted into the text, bringing its creative agency into play. Note that the hunger strike is accompanied by hush, by a *lack* of words. The funeral route of the Irish Republican Bobby Sands was lined by an estimated 100,000 people. Here we are told it was 'the silence of the numbers which made the deepest impression' (Beresford, 1994: 137). One of the hunger strikers in Armagh, Mary Doyle, describes the morning hearing of his death: 'There aren't any words to properly describe the way I felt' (Doyle 2011). From behind prison walls, communication can be difficult. The hunger striking body, however, seems to be able to breach these walls. It communicates in a different way – not with words or text, but through a meaningful performance that is displayed upon and understood by the body. For Karin Andriolo, a protest suicide such as a hunger strike is a radical form of 'embodied minding', since it demands a reaction that cannot be

provoked in any other way. ‘Words’ she notices ‘do not grip unless one gives them hands to do so, unless one embodies them’ (2006: 102).

Bodies importantly allow human actors to express themselves in nonverbal ways, through posture, gestures, facial expressions, dress, and appearance (Coole 2005: 129). Though shrugs and shakes, elbows and eyebrows, bodies can supplement verbal communication, but can also distort it; the communications of the body ‘exceed explicit speech acts’ (Coole 2005: 130). Moreover, such non-verbal communication might not be deliberate: ‘Bodies communicate with other bodies through their gestures and conduct to arouse visceral responses and prompt forms of judgement that do not necessarily pass through conscious awareness’ (Coole and Frost 2010; Machin 2015).

But it is not only the embodied actor who communicates, but also the embodied actor who responds. The body is not only an *instrument* and the *actor*, but also the *audience* of the political spectacle. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the meanings of bodily gestures and appearances are not abstractly fixed, but hinge upon the social context in which the body of the other and our own bodies are situated: ‘It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’. The meaning of a gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 216).

The hunger strike draws attention from an audience. As the hunger strikers bodies diminish, they seem to grow in the gazes that construct them. As Gooldin points out in her discussion of different types of fasting, the fast has a meaning in so far as it has a *spectacular presence*: ‘the ‘spectacle’ of fasting’ she defines as ‘the *appeared, performed, visible, gazed-at* phenomenon of fasting’ (2003: 32. italics in original). Such a spectacle, Gooldin continues, can be the object of various conflicting, gazes. The depiction of hunger strike as spectacle is affirmed in various accounts of the Irish republican hunger strike: ‘No single event’ Arthur writes ‘invested as much spectacle as did the hunger strike’ (1997: 270). Journalists McKittrick and McVea refer to ‘*the spectacle* of ten men giving their lives in an awesome display of self-sacrifice and dedication’ and they claim that ‘the hunger strikers thus won political status *in the eyes of the world*’ (147, my italics). In an analysis of the press coverage of the hunger strikes, Mulcahy says that they garnered ‘unprecedented levels of media coverage’ (1995: 452) and were ‘the subject of much public speculation’ (1995: 461).

Similarly, the suffragettes are understood to have combining hunger and forcible feeding as a violence suffered by the body to create a spectacle: ‘the suffragettes produced themselves as spectacular’ writes one commentator, doing ‘all they could go maintain a public gaze’ (Green, 1993: 1). As Mayhall carefully reminds us, this ‘spectacular politics’ (2003: 46) was entwined with other forms of protest. Nevertheless she acknowledges that, even if this was inaccurate, the hunger strike came to dominant narratives of the suffragettes (1995). The spectacle was viewed from varied gazes, the medical gaze and sadistic stare competing with the suffragettes own gaze. The hunger strike, then, draws attention, although its meaning is not fixed or predetermined.

## The identifying body

Another way in which hunger striking bodies are significant to politics is in the reproduction of a collective identification. The body of the hunger striker is identified as part of a collective for whom its sacrifice is claimed: in its diminishing corporeality it embodies a collective identification. Yet such sacrifice, in turn, affects the meaning of identification. The linkage between the individual body and collective identification is not straightforward: the identification is fed by the hungry body it incorporates.

Joseph Lowndes explains that the American President embodies a national identity, and therefore that the president's body becomes a site of political contest (2013: 470). He explains: "Presidents act as signifiers not only through their policies, philosophies, or partisan alignments... Presidential authority is lodged in - and articulated through - bodies" (2013: 471-2). I suggest that bodies of hunger strikers also articulate identities; but these hunger strikers are not presidents but, on the contrary, ordinary individuals. In the descriptions of hunger striking, 'the ordinary people' are commonly enlisted. For example, in the Irish republican hunger strike: '*The ordinary people* mourned Bobby Sands' (Nelis, 2006: 54. My italics); '*Ordinary Irish people* manifested strong support for the prisoners' (Ballagh, 2006: 113. My italics); 'people who had been living quietly in their communities for many years suddenly came to life' (Kelleher, 2006: 108). In juxtaposition to the intention of the British government to depict the Irish republicans as 'ordinary *criminals*' (Doyle 2011), the hunger strikers themselves are described as 'ten very *ordinary men*' (Beresford, 1994. My italics). While the hunger strike involves an *ordinary* body, this perhaps is precisely why it can come to be identified with the collective; the hunger striker is 'one of us' it 'could be us'. It, too, is a matter of contestation, the ordinary body is a site of politics in which competing gazes prevent the totalisation of its meaning. At the same time, the meaning of this identification was conditioned by both the rational calculation and the affective impact of the hunger strike.

An important question that arises here is whether the 'ordinary body' of the Irish hunger striker is that of a man. Female bodies were involved in the hunger strike too, although their role is often neglected if not entirely written out (Morgan, 1995).<sup>14</sup> Although the H-Block leadership were opposed to women joining the hunger strike, for the Irish republican women in Armagh, it was seen as crucial that they played a role in the protests – partly *because* of their gender - in order to achieve equality with men (Power, 2015). Mary Doyle explains: 'the women were determined to participate as we felt we had an equal stake in achieving the five demands' (2011). On the one hand, these women joined the protests as a way of erasing gender difference (Aretxaga, 1955). On the other, as noted by Theresa O'Keefe, both the oppression *and* the resistance of the prisoners were gendered (2006). Precisely because of their role in reproducing national identification: 'state forces targeted female bodies in a sexual manner as a means of intimidation and humiliation in the hopes of

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<sup>14</sup> I nearly reaffirmed such 'writing out' in this piece. Thanks to the reviewers who pointed the crucial role of gendered bodies in the Irish republican hunger strike.

breaking the republican movement' (2006: 539). Their distinctive use of their own bodies, however, meant they 'blurred the public/private divide and transgressed gender norms in the most scrupulous of ways' (551).

This echoes, then, the protest of the suffragettes. At the same time, the issue of gender oppression was seen by many republicans, including the women themselves, as secondary to the republican cause. For example, one of the women hunger strikers, Mairéad Farrell stated: 'I am oppressed as a woman but I am also oppressed because I'm Irish. Everyone in this country is oppressed and we can't successfully end our oppression as women until we first end the oppression of our country' (quoted in Power, 2015). The women's hunger strike both reaffirmed the republican movement and 'brought into focus the role of women and feminist principles within the movement' (Power 2015).

As Dingley and Mollica notice: 'although the government was able to claim a victory in purely legal terms the strikes may well have been a triumph for Republicans in social and political terms, particularly by galvanizing a communal support previously only latent' (2007: 465). This leads them to conclude that while hunger striking may seem to make little sense in terms of the affect on the government or the protestant/loyalist community, it should instead be understood in terms of the affect it had on the hunger strikers *own* catholic/republican community. This impact is the engendering and galvanisation of an identity and collective community strength (Rolston 1987: 26). At the end of the hunger strike the prisoners published a statement in the Irish Times and 'the appeal is to the *whole* nationalist community' (Arthur 1997: 278. Italics in original).

Similarly, hunger striking did not bring the Suffragettes any nearer to their specified goal of political enfranchisement; it did not help them achieve their formal specified aims. At this point, the increasing militancy of the suffragettes was actually alienating the general public, many of whom had initially been sympathetic to the suffrage movement. But what the suffragettes hunger strike *did* do was to establish a strong identification amongst *themselves*. Parkins suggests that: 'the capacity of [a suffragette's] body to communicate dissent, as well as courage and endurance, powerfully interpellated other suffragettes to identify with her commitment to the cause' (2000: 68). Hunger striking symbolised the unity of suffragettes; it asserted an identity that transcended other differences. At the same time, the hunger strike could be sustained because of 'the feeling of sisterhood that united all women [and] offered a spiritual sustenance to the militants as they endured in prison the pain and torment of hunger-striking and forcible feeding' (Purvis 1995: 96).

Corbett's analysis suggests that militant suffragettes fashioned a collective identity through hunger striking: 'the militant suffragettes forged a collective identity and established an intersubjective model for selfhood through the material practices of hunger striking and forcible feeding.' (1992: 150). As Mayhall observes, the suffragettes used and produced historical myths; an apparently important theme in their campaign was the existence of a lost 'golden age' in which women were permitted entry into the political realm. They

referred to the Saxon parliament of women and of the Magna Carta's use of 'homo' to mean both men and women (Mayhall, 2003: 43). The hunger strike, along with forced feeding, was an embodied protest both ignited by and inspiring the identification of suffragette as an embodied female protestor in the public realm.

In the conclusion of his book, Beresford states that 'the hunger strikers died for a cause far more ancient than the grey walls of Long Kesh prison' (1994: 430). What was this 'ancient cause'? The cause here is also the effect. The hunger strike constructed the 'Ireland' that it made its sacrifice for; a particular 'Ireland' that stood alongside alternative and often competing constructions. Identity construction was a key part of the struggle for both Republican and Loyalist organisations. In his analysis Goalwin refers to the instability of the two communities: 'both sides struggled to construct and define their own collective identities and ideological aims' (2013: 190). In her feminist ethnography, Aretxaga explains that the hunger strike stood as a ritual of redemption, aimed at ending the suffering of both the prisoners and Ireland, in so far as 'the prisoners were the embodiment of the nation' (1997: 81). She writes: 'the prisoners perceived themselves as embodying the history of their country and as such, their actions effected as much the existence of the nation as individual lives' (1997: 81). The hunger strike was constructed within the gaze of the community, the 'ordinary people' and at the same time produced what it stood for.

The hunger strikes on Robben Island worked to galvanise the community within the prison – and to strengthen the position of the ANC. 'The survival and indeed the very possibility of the body politics depended on the survival and strength of the individual body' (Buntman 2003: 256) 'The hunger strikes... were critical to maintaining the literal and metaphorical survival of the social body that Robben Islanders had established' (Buntman 2003: 256). This comes across in Nelson Mandela's account of the 1966 hunger strike:

Through a plastic-wrapped note hidden in our food drums, we learned in July of 1966 that the men in the general section had embarked on a hunger strike to protest poor conditions. The note was imprecise, and we did not know exactly when the strike had started or exactly what it was about. But we would support any strike of prisoners for whatever reason they were striking. Word was passed among us, and we resolved to initiate a sympathetic strike beginning with our next meal. (Mandela 1994: 421)

Colonel Wessels... demanded to know why we were on a hunger strike. I explained that as political prisoners we saw protest to alter prison conditions as an extension of the anti-apartheid struggle. "But you don't even know why they are striking in F and G," he said. I said that did not matter, that the men in F and G were our brothers and that our struggle was indivisible. He snorted, and dismissed me. (Mandela 1994: 422).

In his analysis of hunger strikes in Turkey, Patrick Anderson notices that they fomented the unification of an otherwise diverse community: ‘what is remarkable about the Turkish hunger strike is its development of a large base of strikers and supporters across several traditional divisions.’ (2004: 835). While, as Goalwin (2013) rightly points out, the assertion of a mythical unified identity has *depoliticising* affects, we might argue that at the same time it is only with the unity and solidity of identifications that political projects of resistance can be sustained. Hunger striking coalesces a group who were perhaps previously dispersed or galvanises an already existing identification. The body of the hunger strike is both constructed by and contributes to a collective identity: the body is identified and the identity is embodied.

### **The disrupting body**

Not only does the body of the hunger striker reproduce the collective ‘us’, it also challenges the legitimacy of its opponents and seeks to undermine the status quo. The peculiar power of the hunger strike consists in the body’s interiorisation of the violence of the other ‘The act of self-directed violence interiorised the Other, neutralised its potency, enclosed its defiling power and stored it in the corpse of the hunger striker for use by his support community’ (Feldman, 1991: 237; See also Anderson, 2004: 830). The Irish republicans, anti-apartheid campaigners and the Suffragettes all rejected the state as an illegitimate authority. The hunger strike they embarked upon, however, took the power of the prison and the state and inverted it onto themselves, undermining the dominant order. Naidoo expresses a change in atmosphere after the hunger strike in Robben Island in 1966 created through the (re)claim of power: ‘How permanent would be the gains we did not know. But whatever the authorities did to us, they could never take away our sense of victory or our sense of power’ (Naidoo 2003: 165).

In Feldman’s account of the Irish Republican hunger strike: ‘The prison regime... would be exposed as a machine for degradation and abuse. The performance of the hunger strike would stage the abuse and violence of the Other in the eviscerated flesh of the dying protestor ... the queue of corpses emerging from behind prison walls would shake the moral legitimacy of the British state’ (Feldman 1991 236). Here then it is the actual *production of dead bodies* that poses a challenge to the regime. However, this is not always the mechanism of the hunger strike. For Joanna Simeant the suffering body of the hunger strike embodies pain, and this is just as important as the risk of death. She also explains that the power of the hunger strike can hinge upon the number of individual bodies collectively undertaking it. If a hunger strike is undertaken by those who lack status - precisely *because* they lack status – then numbers count (Simeant 1998). For the Robben Island hunger strike it was the sheer numbers of suffering bodies that augmented the resistance and reinforced the specific demands of the prisoners.

In these ways, the embodied protest of the hunger strike disrupts the status quo. In an environment in which there is little possibility for political action, the body can become a powerful weapon. Buntman explains that even an authoritarian state such as apartheid South Africa leaves certain spaces for resistance (Buntman 2003: 273). However miniscule these spaces are, it is always possible to protest.

But the disruption that the hunger strike perpetuates cannot be predicted. Using the body to protest may be an entirely *rational* choice for those denied political voice. As Yuill points out, the Irish Republican struggle involved meticulously calculated organisation (2007: 5.17). Thus, for him, the myths surrounding the historical use of hunger striking in Ireland is a *resource* rather than a *determinant*. Feldman supports the claim that the Republican hunger strikers were fully cognisant of the political benefits of the religious iconography (1991: 220). For him, the strike involved the conscious utilization of the body as an instrument (1991: 233). And yet, at the same time, while the hunger strike may well have highly rational motives, these utilise and are partly engendered by non-rational bodily perceptions and pre-reflective communal understandings, producing its affective corporeal power. In hunger strikes 'emotions and rationality work in tandem' (Yuill 2007: 5.16) - they 'combine passion, rage and self-sacrifice with reason and intellect' (Koçan and Öncü 2006: 359). This embodied protest is not entirely rational, nor entirely non-rational.

The hunger strike highlights a particular aspect of violence. Wikipedia defines hunger striking as 'a method of non-violent resistance' but this hardly captures the paradoxical and ambiguous relation the hunger strike has to violence in the contexts I have considered in this paper. These hunger strikes involve a peculiar form of violence, a violence that is seized from the state by an individual who then wields this violence upon themselves. It is a 'self-directed violence' (Feldman 1991: 220). By doing this, the hunger strike does violence to the dominant distinctions of politics and sociology.

## **Conclusion**

The use of the hunger strike is not confined to a particular region, culture or historical era. The use of hunger striking has been seen as a matter of a predisposition of certain groups to utilize this form of protest, but such a 'culturalist hypothesis' needs careful qualification (Simeant 1998). Aretxaga strongly challenges the simplistic and erroneous stereotype or 'colonial trope' of the Irish as violent and irrational myth followers: 'the mythology of sacrifice, ancestral or Christological, as the alleged cause of the current political violence in Northern Ireland seems to me a new origin myth that conveniently permits commentators to ignore the field of sociological and political power relations at play' (1997: 94).

The hunger strike appears as a form of political protest in the contemporary world. Although the response it generates is often steeped in emotions, it can be utterly rational and strategic. And yet, the hunger striker cannot be sure of the

degree or content of the impact of their protest. It may win in its short-term demands but worsen a situation, it might heighten political antagonism, provoking more violence. In becoming part of a political protest the hungry body takes on meaning, and is constructed in different ways by the socio-political gazes within which it is a spectacle. The hunger strike incorporates its contradictions and deftly uses them to configure its protest. But these contradictions undermine any certainty for its outcomes; the spectacle of the hunger strike is ambiguous and contested in its on-going constructions.

Intensely serious, often tragic, the hunger strike also contains an element of the absurd. As Naidoo describes: ‘Lots of us laughed at ourselves at the ridiculousness of taking action against the authorities by depriving ourselves of food’ (2003: 156). Inverting the violence of the ‘other’ upon itself, the body paradoxically serves as a powerful weapon that can communicate, identify and disrupt, but in unpredictable and ambiguous ways. The political protest of the collective hunger strike, performed across a disordered dichotomy of body-object and political-subject, attests to the political significance of bodies in social movements and political protests. In its diminishing corporeality, the hunger striking body heightens the urgency of the search for answers, as it simultaneously provokes the posing of new questions.

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