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Life in Limbo: Asylum Detention and the Environmental Conditions of Hope

ABSTRACT: *Within the recent glut of philosophical work on hope, relatively little attention has been devoted to the circumstantial conditions that frustrate or accommodate hoping. In this article, I show how an individual's spatial environment can constrain their capacity to sustain determinate hopes for the future via an extended case study: long-term refugee detention. Taking seriously refugees' claims that a central cause of widespread hopelessness is the feeling of being in limbo, and drawing on recent work on the role of the imagination in hoping, I demonstrate how an individual's spatial environment can limit imaginative access to the interim steps between their present circumstances and a desired future, making it difficult to see any way their hope could be realized.*

KEYWORDS: Hope, Despair, Refugees, Asylum, Detention

1. Introduction

Within the recent glut of philosophical work on hope, relatively little attention has been devoted to the conditions under which hope thrives or falters. The major exception is Katie Stockdale's recent *Hope Under Oppression* (2021), which compellingly analyzes how an individual's capacity for hope can be damaged by oppressive social systems. But oppressive political and social structures are not the only threat to hope. In this article, I show how our spatial environment can undermine our ability to sustain determinate hopes for the future as well. I do so via an extended analysis of an exigent case study: the apparent difficulty of maintaining hope in refugee detention spaces.

Over the past decade, a number of well-documented crises of hopelessness have roiled migration chokepoints across the globe. Humanitarian organizations have recorded alarming rates of self-harm and suicide amongst detained refugees and asylum seekers. A 2018 report on Australia's offshore detention center on Nauru, for example, found that 30% of asylum seekers detained on the island had attempted suicide, and 60% had engaged in suicidal ideation (Médecins Sans Frontières 2018: 5). In a 2020 study of asylum detention facilities on Greek islands, 35% of interviewees reported suicidal thoughts and 18% had attempted to take their lives (International Rescue Committee 2020: 15). In response, observers have primarily called for more trauma-informed psychiatric care and improved living conditions for asylum seekers (IRC 2020; MSF 2018; Save the Children 2017). While such recommendations are sensible given the similarly high rates of PTSD and depression amongst such groups, I think we need to take refugee's claims about *hopelessness*

seriously as well. Interviewed refugees often invoke a loss of hope to explain the prevalence of suicide and self-harm in such situations (Save the Children 2017: 12; MSF 2018: 6, 35; Benjamin 2017). And while hopelessness can undoubtedly be informed by past traumas and present degradations, it is fundamentally about the future.

Importantly, this loss of hope seems particularly acute in certain kinds of refugee spaces. A 2015 study found self-harm rates of 26% in Australia's offshore detention facility on Nauru, but only 2.7% amongst asylum seekers in community detention on the Australian mainland (Hedrick, et al. 2019: 6). Corroboratively, a 2022 systematic review found significantly higher risk of suicidal behavior amongst refugees in camps and asylum processing facilities than in other displacement contexts (Cogo, et al. 2022). Why has the future grown so bleak for refugees and asylum seekers? And why is hope more difficult to maintain in certain kinds of detention spaces?

In accounting for their loss of hope, refugees often appeal to feeling as though they are stuck in limbo (MSF 2018; Rendón and Samiou 2016: 3). In this article, I draw a connection between this sense of limbo, the proliferation of refugee detention spaces over the past decade, and the epidemics of hopelessness that have seemed to fester, in particular, in them (sections 3–4). To make that connection, I draw on recent philosophical work on hope and imagination to show that our ability to sustain particular hope is conditioned, in part, by the places we inhabit, which shape our imaginative relation to those desired futures. I argue that spatial confinement in general, and the liminality of contemporary refugee detention spaces more radically, shortens inhabitants' imaginative horizons, making it difficult to see how desired outcomes could come about, and so undermining hope for those ends (section 5).

My aims in this article are both theoretical and normative. I aim to contribute to the burgeoning philosophical literature on the nature of hope and its conditions. But I also hope to shed some philosophical light on the widespread mental health crisis amongst refugees and asylum seekers, showing that it is not only the specters of the past and the humiliations of the present that engender despair, but also the way current detention practices place refugees' desired futures out of even imaginative reach. Since hope is a vital human good, we may have additional reasons to think that the continued consignment of refugees to such spaces constitutes a significant wrong.

2. Conditions of Hope

Much of the recent philosophical literature on hope has turned around the recognition that, when considering the same desired possibilities, some people hope while others do not. This fact is troubling for what has been dubbed the "standard account" of hope, which defines hope as a desire for some outcome and a belief that said outcome is possible but not certain (Day 1969: 89). My hope that readers should be convinced of my argument here, for example, is seemingly constituted by a desire that they may not have serious reservations and the belief that this is possible but not inevitable (alas). But as a number of thinkers have observed, two people who both desire the same outcome and have the same beliefs about its probability may nevertheless differ in their hope. In Adrienne Martin's famous example, two terminally ill cancer patients

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may both desperately want a new experimental therapy to work, and both know that the odds of that occurring are only 1%, yet one (Bess) hopes it will work, while another (Alan) despairs over its low odds (Martin 2014: 14).[1]

To account for this, various amendments to the standard account have been proposed in recent years. For the most part, they appeal to occurrent psychological factors to explain when Bess hopes but Alan does not: e.g., that Bess is able to incorporate her desire for the outcome into her agency as a reason for action while Alan cannot (Martin 2014), that Bess is able to imagine how the recovery could come about while Alan cannot (Kwong 2019), or that Bess perceives the situation as more encouraging than Alan (Milona and Stockdale 2018). But we might still wonder *why* Bess (e.g.) sees the situation as more encouraging than Alan. That is, we might wonder what factors contribute to Bess having these occurrent psychological states which Alan lacks.

One plausible answer is that differences in hoping come down to differences in individual psychological dispositions: some people are the hopeful sort, while others tend toward despair when faced with long odds. And we can construct various developmental or character-based explanations of how those dispositions may have come about.[2] But another plausible way is to appeal to differences in their *circumstances*. In *Hope Under Oppression*, Katie Stockdale shows how oppressive social and political structures can shape what oppressed individuals hope for, the degree to which they are hopeful, and even their capacity to hope at all (Stockdale 2021: 23). Thus, for Stockdale, fully understanding differences in how individuals hope may require us to look at differences in social positioning as well. More generally, considering how external circumstances of various types shape the internal states constitutive of hoping — like our beliefs and desires — can help us develop a fuller picture of how we hope.

Stockdale argues that oppression can damage an individual's degree of hope (the aspect most salient to our investigation) by altering their desires or changing their beliefs about the probability that the hoped-for outcome will obtain (2021: 28). This is because our desires and beliefs — which, following the standard account, are constitutive of hope — are profoundly shaped by the social and political structures in which we are embedded and formed. In Stockdale's example, a young Black girl's hope to become an engineer may be threatened by dominant cultural scripts and messages about women's abilities in math and science, or a lack of representation of Black women in that field, causing her to assign a deflated probability estimate to the desired outcome (or, if there is persistent prejudice, an appropriately low estimate), and so damaging her degree of hope for it (2021: 28). Continued frustrations and obstacles along her educational path might even make the desire to be an engineer fade over time, causing her hope to disappear altogether. And over the longer-term, oppression can alter desire and belief formation via processes of psychological sedimentation, shaping individuals' dispositions to be hopeful about *any* desired outcome.

[1] I present Meirav's (2009) stronger version of the paradox here for the sake of convenience.

[2] See, e.g., Calhoun's (2003) notion of "interpretive schemes" or McGeer's (2004: 105) developmental account of hope.

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Stockdale's analysis is an important amendment to the philosophical literature's relative lack of attention to the conditions under which hope thrives or falters.[3] But it's not clear that it can account for the phenomena of refugee despair with which we are — and she, as well, is — concerned (Stockdale 2021: 27). For many detained or encamped refugees, the desires that are constitutive of their hopes have not dissipated: they still want to make it to a country they consider safe, to be reunited with loved ones, or simply to escape detention. And it's not clear that their beliefs about the likelihood of those outcomes obtaining have changed either. Many encamped refugees, for example, know that less than 0.5% of refugees are resettled in another state in any given year (UNHCR 2023: 2). Yet their hopes for resettlement may nevertheless wane over time, despite not having disappeared at the time of acquiring that belief. It's of course probable that some refugees have naïve or outdated beliefs about, for example, asylum or resettlement policies in the United States, and so initially overestimate the likelihood of being granted protection expeditiously, revising downward later in light of subsequent evidence. But it's unlikely this is true of everyone. It's also not clear how the variable rates of hopelessness in the different asylum detention settings described earlier could be accounted for in terms of differences in belief about the likelihood of a successful asylum appeal, since detention setting appears to have no clear impact on that likelihood (Hedrick, et al. 2019: 6).[4] It seems, then, that an individual's beliefs and desires can remain the same regarding some outcome, yet over time their hope can dwindle or even falter into despair. Given that fact, beliefs and desires seemingly cannot be the only mechanisms via which external circumstances act upon our hope.

Nor is it clear that oppression is the only circumstantial threat to hope. Thus, while Stockdale's work has thrown open the door to analyzing hope's external conditions, there is room for further investigation. I will focus on the way our spatial environment can act as an external constraint on hope. In the next section, I begin to explore how this might help us make sense of the widespread crisis of hopelessness amongst detained refugees.

3. Crises of Hope

In the past few years, human rights observers and scholars have documented startlingly high rates of self-harm and suicide amongst displaced populations, particularly those languishing in camp or detention settings. When interviewed, refugees often stress their loss of hope as an explanation. Benjamin, a prisoner in Australia's infamous offshore asylum "processing" center on the island of Nauru, said about a friend who had self-immolated: he was "tired of living without hope" (Benjamin 2017). Likewise, a 2014

[3] A further philosophical resource in this area, in a slightly different key, is Walker (2006).

[4] We could argue that, even if the likelihood itself hasn't changed, individuals' beliefs about it have. Pettit (2004: 157) for example, has suggested that hope involves a disposition to artificially inflate the probability of an outcome obtaining. This could plausibly account for our paradox if we assumed that refugees had been treating the prospect of resettlement "as if" it were higher than they knew it to be, then revised in light of further evidence. However, I side with Martin (2014: 22) and Calhoun (2018: 81) in worrying that this requires introducing an unfitting amount of epistemic distortion into hope; on my view, hope is often intellectually responsible.

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study of encamped Syrian refugee children found that 26% felt "so hopeless that they did not want to carry on living" (James, et al. 2014: 42). This global crisis of hopelessness has become a common theme in various forced migration literatures — humanitarian, scholarly, legal — but there has been little sustained analysis of *why* refugees are losing hope.

Perhaps that is because the answer seems rather obvious at first glance: most refugees are fleeing scar-filled pasts, and many are living in abject conditions — of course they're hopeless. But while past experiences and present conditions can certainly inflect the way one hopes — by, for example, shaping one's dispositions or coloring one's beliefs about an outcome's likelihood — hope is fundamentally about the future. We might be tempted by the thought that the reason for such pervasive hopelessness amongst people on the move is their profound *uncertainty* about the future: about their prospects for asylum, resettlement, or returning home. But that is also implausible, since uncertainty about the future is in fact constitutive of hoping, and not necessarily constitutive of hopelessness (Milona and Stockdale 2018: 205).

Why, then, does the future appear so grim to so many refugees and asylum seekers today? This question is particularly striking since hope almost definitionally plays a pronounced role in the lives of the displaced. To leave one's home and life behind, even under considerable duress, typically involves believing on some level that a better future is possible elsewhere. Those hopes in turn sustain refugees on asylum journeys that are often unthinkably difficult and dangerous. Yet for many, it is only when they are on the cusp of making it to the places they have dreamt of that their hopes wither. Why?

My aim is not to answer this diagnostic question in full. The reasons for widespread hopelessness amongst the displaced are, in all likelihood, grossly overdetermined. Rather, my aim is to show that, for detained refugees, their spatial environment is a plausible contributing factor. By addressing some of the more obvious alternative explanations at the outset, I hope to have carved out a bit of space for that analysis.

But this turn toward refugees' environments requires some positive motivation as well. One reason to think that they are etiologically relevant here is that rates of hopelessness appear to track differences in spatial context. As noted earlier, a 2015 Australian study found that rates of self-harm amongst asylum seekers in traditional detention facilities onshore were an order of magnitude higher than in less restrictive facilities onshore, and highest of all in extraterritorial detention centers (Hedrick, et. al. 2019: 6).[5] A 2022 systematic review found higher risk of suicidal behavior amongst encamped refugees and detained asylum seekers across the globe (Cogo, et. al. 2022). And a 2018 systematic review of refugee mental health found, in general, higher symptom rates in detained versus non-detained refugees (Von Werthern, et. al. 2018).

While these studies suggest that refugees' environments matter, they don't explain *why* they matter. What is it about detention — and perhaps certain types of detention

[5] The fact that detention setting was determined, in these cases, by demographic differences rather than likelihood of asylum application approval suggests that detention setting was indeed the operative factor.

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spaces in particular — that undermines refugees' capacity to sustain hope? And which aspects of hope — or of how we hope — dispose it to being frustrated by detention?

One of the more common explanations provided by refugees and observers for the prevalence of hopelessness in such settings is the feeling of being in limbo (MSF 2018: 7; Save the Children 2017: 10; IRC 2020: 30). As a 2016 Oxfam report on asylum detention centers on Greek islands emphasized, "the state of physical, psychological and legal limbo in which people find themselves has led to a sense of hopelessness and desperation" (Rendón and Samiou 2016: 3). That sense of limbo is multifaceted and has many potential sources, but the most obvious and perhaps the most potent of these is the structure of the detention spaces themselves.

The detention of people on the move has grown dramatically over the last decade around the world. And the global growth of asylum seeking has necessitated the creation of new cartographic forms by which states can continue to insulate themselves from unwelcome newcomers — even (or perhaps especially) those with legitimate claims for protection. As the geographer Alison Mountz has catalogued, states increasingly rely on a "proliferating series of spaces of confinement and limbo" — especially islands and other offshore and naturally isolated spaces — to deter, frustrate, and contain human mobility seen as a threat to state sovereignty (2020: xx). The EU's "hotspot" model on Greek islands, Australia's "Pacific Solution" of indefinite asylum seeker detention on the extraterritorial islands of Manus and Nauru, and Bangladesh's efforts to relocate 100,000 Rohingya refugees to the previously uninhabited island of Bhasan Char are but a few examples of this new and multiplying geography of exclusion and containment. As a spatial form, islands foster the isolation and immobilization typical of the carceral, often in legal grey zones that allow for the exercise of sovereign power with limited accountability. But in doing so, they cast detained refugees "into spatial, temporal, and legal zones of limbo" (Mountz 2020: xxvii).[6]

Remanded to temporary accommodations in isolated camps or detention facilities, cut off spatially and socially from the surrounding world, awaiting asylum or resettlement decisions and uncertain when those might come, the displaced increasingly find themselves stuck long-term in the strange abeyance of having left but not yet having arrived. As such, their lives often feel indefinitely on hold. This feeling of being in limbo is, I think, characteristic of detention in general, and I intend the analysis that follows to be generalizable to other forms of incarceration. But the studies noted above show that rates of suicidal behavior amongst asylum seekers are not just high in detention spaces generally, but are particularly so in certain *kinds* of detention spaces: specifically, those that aggravate the spatial confinement and isolation characteristic of detention and incarceration generally, and in doing so, make even more acute this sense of being in limbo. This radicalization of the relevant spatial characteristics makes, I think, the case of refugee detention particularly instructive for thinking about hope's conditions and the ways spatial confinement can frustrate hope. But since the argument that follows is

[6] See Shachar (2020) for an extensive analysis of the legal motivations behind extraterritorial border control.

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grounded in these spatial characteristics, other carceral spaces that have similar properties will also tend to have similar effects. For ease, I will refer to these properties as liminality, and my aim in this article is to provide an account of how liminal detention spaces undermine detainees' ability to sustain determinate hopes for their futures.

4. Locating Hope

A second reason to suspect that refugees' spatial environments are etiologically relevant can be found in the burgeoning literature on situated affect. Influenced by the phenomenological tradition and theories of extended mind, philosophers and cognitive scientists have recently been paying increased attention to the dynamic relation between our affective lives and our material and social environments, including the way our physical environment shapes our capacity to experience certain emotions, moods, and affective attitudes (Colombetti & Roberts 2015; Krueger & Szanto 2016; Carter et al. 2016). Drawing on Kim Sterelny's cognitive scaffolding framework, a number of commenters have observed the ways in which built environments today are designed to elicit and support certain kinds of emotions and to undermine others via affective scaffolding (Sterelny 2010; Colombetti & Krueger 2015; Saarinen 2020; Krueger 2023). While there is ongoing debate about whether hope should be understood as an emotion or not, it is clear that hoping and hopelessness tend to have a rich affective dimension (Milona and Stockdale 2018; Stockdale 2019). If our spatial contexts and material environments are powerful affective regulators, then it reasonable to consider refugees' environments as a possible source of hope's dissipation.

At least at first glance, physical environments do seem relevant to the way we hope. We all relate to our futures — doxastically, desideratively, actively, imaginatively — from our embeddedness in particular places. That is, our relationship to our futures and to determinate future possibilities, is situated — if not in one particular place, then in the cluster of places we habitually move through that make up the spatial dimension of our lives. Thus, how we are located in relation to our future possibilities informs how we relate to them. A small-town actress's hope to become a Hollywood star, for example, will always be shaped to some degree by the relation between those two spaces — by the pushes and pulls of small-town life, its isolation or proximity to Tinseltown, and the ease of access to the city epistemically, actively, imaginatively, etc.

My target here is hopes that refugees and other detained migrant populations maintain for outcomes located *outside* of those detention spaces. The main reason for this is that refugee spaces are usually designed to be transitional, and to insist on that temporariness to their inhabitants. The consequent paucity of infrastructure means that refugees rarely see a meaningful future for themselves within such spaces. As such, the kinds of meaningful projects involving outcomes for which one could harbor substantial hopes are often simply unavailable within such spaces (Trautmann 2024: 12). Of course, one can generate and sustain minimal desires, and so fairly prosaic hopes, in such spaces: say, that it doesn't rain tomorrow, or that one can play soccer with one's friends later in the week. But there are significantly fewer outcomes

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to which one can attach what Pettit calls "substantial" hopes: hopes that have a certain life-shaping significance, and that thereby tend to have the characteristic motivational, agency-shaping, and psychologically-fortifying role we typically ascribe to hope (2004: 152). Instead, refugees' most substantial hopes tend to be directed toward futures outside detention settings: asylum seekers might hope to gain access to a state where they can live a life free from violence, persecution, or deprivation, while encamped refugees might hope to return to homes no longer ravaged by war, to be integrated into host states, or to be resettled elsewhere. And such hopes are often attended by more specific ones as well: a refugee might hope to open a bakery in Sydney, or to reclaim his father's farm in Somalia, or to watch her niece's soccer game in Canada. Substantial hopes like these have been shown to be psychologically sustaining in difficult circumstances, to help bearers cope with trauma and other forms of acute psychological stress, and have a complex but important relationship to agency in the face of dispiriting odds (Lee and Gallagher 2018; Long and Gallagher 2018; Snyder et al. 2018; Mason 2021; McGeer 2004). Such hopes therefore tend to be a particularly vital force in their holders' lives.

But our relationship to desired futures, as I have suggested, is articulated through our present circumstances, which include our physical environment. If that is correct, then refugee detention spaces may indeed shape how detainees' hope, including whether they are able to sustain hopes for determinate outcomes located elsewhere. In the next section, I develop an account of how they might do so.

5. Hope and the Horizons of Imagination

What is the mechanism by which detention strains refugees' hope? The obvious place to look is at changes in an individual's desire or their beliefs about some outcome's possibility. This, as we saw in section 2, is how Stockdale accounts for the damage that oppression can do to hope (2021: 23–32). But while initially plausible, I argued that this can't offer us a full explanation of the crisis: it seems unlikely that most detained refugees have lost the desires that are constitutive of their hopes, and it's not obvious that their beliefs about the prospect of the desired outcome obtaining have changed either. As such, accounting for the growing loss of hope amongst detained refugees will require us to move beyond the standard account of hope. Recent attention to the role of the imagination in hoping seems to provide a particularly promising way to do so.

5.1 The Role of Imagination in Hoping

Both philosophers and lay-people tend to assume that hoping for something characteristically involves imagining it (Aristotle 2020: 1370a6; Bovens 1999; Calhoun 2018; Kwong 2019; Humbert-Droz and Vazard 2023; Huber 2025). A detained refugee hoping to be reunited with her family doesn't merely desire that outcome and believe it's possible, she is also disposed to imagine the reunion in her mind: the first hug at the doorstep, the relief on her mother's face, perhaps the earlier notification that her asylum request had been approved, or the journey to her family's home. When we hope, that is, we often picture the desired outcome,

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projecting ourselves imaginatively into a scenario in which it has been realized, or we imagine the paths that could bring us there.

Some philosophers have suggested that fantasizing about or imagining some outcome is not only characteristic of hoping, but constitutive of it. In an important early amendment of the standard account, Luc Bovens argued that we couldn't rightly say that the host of a gathering hoped some individual would attend if he hadn't, in addition to desiring it and believing it possible, engaged in at least some "mental imaging" of that outcome — thinking how nice it would be to see that person, or how well they would get along with some other guest, etc. (1999: 674). More recently, Cheshire Calhoun has argued that hoping necessarily involves "imaginatively inhabiting" the positive realization of the future state (2018: 3). The difference between a hopeful agent and a despairing one, she suggests, is that the former previsages in their reflective imagination a future in which the desired outcome has successfully come about, while the latter does not or cannot (2018: 85). And Jack Kwong has contended that, to hope for p, we need to not only desire p and believe that p is possible, but also be able to see some "way" that p could come about. The person who hopes, that is, is able to imaginatively visualize the steps between their present state and some desired future state, whereas the despairing person cannot (2019: 244).[7]

These constitutive accounts of the relation between imagination and hope have come under criticism recently from Humbert-Droz and Vazard (2023) and Huber (2025), who observe that there are types of hopes that do not require the bearer to engage in any imaginative activity. I might hope that it is sunny tomorrow during a family picnic, but I don't seem to need to visualize the blanket spread out beneath warm rays to be able to do so. Likewise, when I hope in the split-second before it arrives that the runaway trolley will not hit a crossing pedestrian, I simply don't have time to imagine that outcome or the way it might come about — the pedestrian diving out of the way, the trolley coming to a screeching halt (Huber 2025: 158). Thus, the claim that some form of imaginative activity is *necessary* to hoping seems, at first glance, false. Instead, it is argued, we should understand imaginings as a mere common "output" of hope (Martin 2011: 157; Humbert-Droz and Vazard 2023: 8).

These arguments against strong versions of the constitutive claim do indeed look damaging. However, their scope is more limited than it might at first seem. For one, the cases that falsify the constitutive claim tend to involve, as Huber acknowledges, trivial, highly probable, or episodic hopes (2025: 158). In contrast, the kinds of hopes we're concerned with here, the kinds of hopes whose loss might threaten a refugee's general well-being, are not trivial, highly-probable, or episodic, but substantial hopes that need to be sustained for a long time in the face of low odds — they are hopes

[7] In later work, Kwong (2020) makes a distinction between hoping and being hopeful, motivated by the observation that we seem to be able to hope for some outcome without being hopeful that it will obtain (e.g. I sincerely hope that global climate emissions will go down soon, but I am not hopeful that they will). This distinction is plausible, and though I do not adopt it in order to maintain consistency with Kwong's 2019 text, the argument that follows is compatible with it: claims about environmental pressures on an individual's hope could be construed, instead, as claims about environmental pressures on an individual's ability to remain hopeful.

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about whether one will be granted safety from an oppressive regime, or be able to see loved ones again, or leave a prison that has afforded them only misery. Critiques of Kwong's "pathways" account are similarly limited. Palmqvist argues that it is defeated by Jonathan Lear's notion of "radical hope" — in his potent example, the Crow chief Plenty Coups' hope for Crow survival and eventual flourishing absent any determinate idea of how that might come about after the destruction of their previous way of life (Palmqvist 2021: 688; Lear 2006). But as a number of philosophers have argued, radical hope should probably be understood as different in kind from ordinary hopes — more of an anticipatory stance toward the future as one open to possibility or intervention than an intentional attitude regarding some specific future outcome (Calhoun 2018: 75; Ratcliffe 2013: 601; Blöser, et al. 2020: 2). If radical hope is indeed different in kind, it's not clear that theories of ordinary hope like Kwong's should be expected to be able to capture it.

Notably, despite their critiques of the constitutive claim, both Humbert-Droz and Vazard and Huber end up ascribing important functions to hopeful imaginings, arguing that it is the imagination that gives hope much of its epistemic value and motivational power (Humbert-Droz and Vazard 2023: 15; Huber 2025: 159). In developing those claims, both sets of authors focus on imagining the desired *outcome* of a hope. I will focus, in contrast, on Kwong's account, which focuses on the *pathways* by which that outcome might obtain, and so seems particularly relevant to cases of substantial hopes whose odds are low, or whose potential paths to realization are obscure or fraught.

Consider, then, Kwong's familiar example of a philosopher struggling with a difficult paper: Margaret has a sense that her intriguing ideas could eventually fit together in a coherent argument, but after numerous frustrating attempts to structure her thoughts, she cannot see a way forward and gives up on the project in despair. Soon afterwards, she attends a lecture that seems to offer a new theoretical framework for her essay. She is not certain that the framework will ultimately solve her problems, but she can see some new avenues of research and potential connections. Her hope rekindled, she takes up the essay again.

Taking the earlier critiques into account, a moderated version of Kwong's constitutive claim still seems available to us: being able to see some way that a desired outcome could come about — being able to imagine some path between one's present circumstances and a desired future outcome — is often integral to our capacity to sustain substantial hopes. And when our hopes are beset by difficult circumstances, low odds, dispiriting setbacks, or a high degree of uncertainty, there is likely to be an even tighter connection between our capacity for hope and our ability to imaginatively "see" some way the desired outcome could come about.[8] This formulation both (a) narrows the scope of cases to which the constitutive claim applies and (b) slightly weakens it in order to avoid the earlier objections. But it retains the potent insight that imaginings are not merely an output of hope, but often a condition — though not a strictly necessary condition — of hope.

[8] This accords with Huber's claim that imagination plays a particularly significant role in agency- and resolve-testing circumstances (2025: 158).

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5.2 Limits of the Imagination

When we hope, there is typically a gap between our present circumstances and the desired future outcome. Kwong argues that our capacity to generate or sustain hope often depends on our ability to imaginatively "fill in" that space with some "path" from our present position to that desired future outcome — some conceivable and at least plausible set of events or interim steps that constitute a "way" it could come about. Despair, in contrast, occurs when one is unable to imaginatively fill that gap between present and future with any intermediate steps. In such cases, the space between present and future seems an unbridgeable chasm rather than traversable terrain (Kwong 2019: 247).

This helps explain why the constitutive claim falls prey to cases of "trivial" hopes like "I hope it's sunny tomorrow," and why this kind of imaginative work is particularly important for substantive hopes with a high degree of uncertainty or low odds. Hoping that it will be sunny tomorrow doesn't require an act of imaginative "filling in" of that intervening space because we generally have a background assumption that there is a "way" that it being sunny tomorrow could come about — namely, that it is not rainy or cloudy. That said, for someone for whom it being sunny tomorrow is not a trivial, but a substantive hope (say, James Ramsay in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), or when the possibility looks particularly slim (the meteorologist has decreed that a big storm is coming), then Kwong's suggestion seems to hold: James's hope that it will be fine enough to visit the lighthouse tomorrow will likely be buoyed by any imaginative work he can do to see some way it could come about (e.g. that the coming storm will turn north and avoid the Hebrides, that the naysaying meteorologist is often wrong).

Moreover, as I will demonstrate momentarily, the more *concretely* and *realistically* we can fill in that intervening space with interim steps, the more our hope will be buoyed by those imaginative acts. Conversely, circumstantial features of our worlds that frustrate our imaginative capacity to bridge the gap between the present and the desired future with sufficiently determinate and realistic ideas about how those ends might come about can put pressure on our ability to maintain particular hopes.

Of course, our imaginations are potent and resourceful, drawing on the vast panoply of our experience to creatively combine, translate, and model in ways that allow us to project toward unexperienced possibilities. How, then, can our spatial circumstances limit our imagination in the manner described?

Importantly, for Kwong, hope is not kindled or buttressed merely by imagining some way that the desired outcome could come about; we must also see that path as a "genuine possibility" (2019: 246). Put in another way, our imagination, in conceiving of a path to some desired outcome, must have a certain fidelity to reality to be capable of sustaining our hope. Indeed, a properly constrained imagination is often the difference between sustaining hope and hope faltering or lapsing into mere wishful thinking: Margaret will likely have a hard time sustaining hope for her writing project if the only way she can see that project being completed is divine intervention or involves an unbelievable inflation of her philosophical abilities. Far from being wholly insensitive to facts about the world (as its reputation usually has

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it), then, imagination is most hope sustaining when responsive to the way the world actually is.[9]

Likewise, the more concretely we can imaginatively fill in the gap between our present and some desired future, the more sustainable our hope will be. If Margaret has only a vague sense that something in that lecture could benefit her paper, her hope is likely to be weaker than if she picks up on a specific theory that she can see being helpful in framing the opening salvo of her argument. Huber similarly insists on the importance of hope having "concrete imaginative content" about both the desired outcome and the pathways and strategies that might bring it about (2025: 15, 18). Being able to do this — being able to imaginatively "see" how we can get from "here" to "there" — requires a certain amount of epistemic access to the intervening terrain between our present and some desired future. As Amy Kind has argued, the imagination is highly dependent on the availability of raw, relevant experiential resources (2022: 39). When combined with the realism constraint introduced above, this suggests that accurate, concrete information about the space between present and future that we can use to imaginatively populate that gap will be particularly helpful in generating or sustaining hope.

Consider an example common in the philosophical literature on hope: in the film *Shawshank Redemption*, both Andy and Red agree that their odds of successfully escaping from prison are only 1 in 1,000, but Andy maintains hope for that possibility, while Red despairs over it (Bovens 1999: 668). Philosophers have tried to explain this difference in attitude in a variety of ways, many of them plausible, but one notable difference between the two characters is the depth of Andy's knowledge about the steps he would need to take to get out of prison — how he could negotiate the intervening space between his present circumstances and his hoped-for liberation. Andy sees the empty hollow behind his cell wall, the connection of that passage to the prison's sewage system, and the terminus of those sewers beyond the prison walls, enlivening his hope with determinate, accurate conceptions (gleaned from prison blueprints) of the obstacles he will need to overcome to escape. This imaginative conception of the intervening space between present and future furnishes Andy with affective scaffolding on which his hopes can climb. Red, on the other hand, can only see the impenetrable, insurmountable walls encircling him. The space between his confined present and a hoped-for future beyond those walls is not populated with any concrete, realistic steps he might take to bridge the gap, so it appears to him a chasm, and he despairs.

Circumstantial conditions that limit imaginative access to the intermediate space between one's present and a desired future — and that therefore frustrate an individual's capacity to fill in that intermediary space with concrete and constrained imaginings of ways that outcome might come about — are likely to undermine hope. This, I will endeavor to show, is precisely what today's highly liminal forms of refugee detention tend to do: in their intensive containment, immobilization, and isolation, they cut off detainees' epistemic access to the world outside those spaces, and so also

[9] Humbert-Droz and Vazard make a related argument — drawing on Amy Kind's recent work on imaginative constraint (2016) — that hope is most epistemically valuable and motivationally potent when any associated imaginings of the desired outcome are constrained by what is realistically possible (2023: 15).

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their imaginative access. By making the space between refugees' present and their desired futures imaginatively opaque, they add to the sense of being in limbo described earlier and make it difficult to imagine in a concrete and constrained — and so hope-sustaining — way how those outcomes could come about.

Conversely, environments that multiply paths to individuals' desired futures by augmenting spatial or temporal connections to that future or furnishing imaginative resources should have the opposite effect. We might think that casinos do something like this. If someone hopes to get rich quick, stepping into a casino with its blinking money signs, clear sightlines to other players cashing in at the cage, banks of slot machines suggesting that a windfall is a mere lever pull away, etc. would multiply that individual's resources for "seeing" how today could be their lucky day. How specific environments impact an individual's hope depends in part on the content of that hope, but in general, environments that foster connections between an individual's present circumstances and some desired future would tend to be hope-enhancing, while environments that cut off physical and imaginative access to that intervening landscape tend to be hope-dampening. In the next sections, I elaborate two ways in which contemporary refugee detention spaces have the latter effect.

5.3 Spatial Liminality and Imaginative Horizons

The first has to do with the spatial structure of the kinds of liminal spaces I have described, particularly their containment and isolation. Detention, by definition, shortens the agential, perceptual, experiential, and epistemic horizons of the detained. One cannot see much past the barbed-wire-topped fences of an asylum processing center, or experience much of the world beyond a closed camp. This means that detained refugees have quite limited access — of these various modes — to the intermediate space of potential between their present circumstances and some desired, external future. The space between our present and our futures need not always be conceptualized in such a distinctly spatial manner. But for people on the move whose hopes are so often located elsewhere, and whose ability to realize those hopes is so often structured by long and difficult journeys to those places, the visibility and imaginability of the intermediate geographic *space* between present and future will tend to be particularly significant to their ability to hope. And because, as I argued in the previous section, an individual's imaginative grasp of that intermediate space is (at least partly) dependent on their experiential and epistemic access to it, detained refugees often find themselves with diminished resources for imaginatively "seeing" how some desired future could come about. Detention involves not just the circumscription of one's agency, then, but one's imaginative capacities as well, and this in turn frustrates detainees' abilities to sustain substantial hopes.

The profound isolation of today's liminal refugee spaces likewise limits refugees' imaginative access to that intermediate space. Spatial isolation typically entails social isolation — indeed, critics have argued that this is one of the primary motivations for the continued location of refugee spaces in far-flung locales — and so detained refugees are deprived of a further source of epistemic, and so imaginative, access to that intermediate space of possibility: social interactions (Mountz 2020: 141).

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In his memoir of the five years he spent wrongfully imprisoned in Guantanamo, Murat Kurnaz describes the way his first meeting with a lawyer restored hope to the prisoners on his block: "[we] were connected to the world again! We knew what was happening outside Guantanamo!" (2008: 207).[10] I take it that part of the significance of that experience for Kurnaz was that this meager epistemic access to the outside world also gave him imaginative access to potential ways his release might come about — for example, simply knowing where he was, or that a legal case was being developed on his behalf. As such, he was able to fill in the space between present and future in a more determinate and constrained, and so hope-sustaining, way. Conversely, by depriving detainees of imaginative access to the intermediate space between their present reality and a desired future, spaces of extreme spatial and social isolation of this sort — cases that are increasingly common in the carceral, liminal landscapes that have come to mark the contemporary response to asylum seekers and refugees in protracted displacement — undermine refugees' ability to sustain hope. Instead, the unyielding material environment and isolation ensure that refugees' surroundings remain affectively "smooth," lacking any of the affective scaffolding on which hope might get a foothold.

Finally, isolation also makes the intermediary space between present and desired future obscure or illegible. The places we inhabit and move through typically open up to one another in a kind of nesting structure: I am currently writing at a desk, which is tucked under the eave, in a room, which is within a larger building, which in turn opens up upon on a particular street, that lies at the edge of a city, etc. That nesting structure is not just spatial: the fact that my house opens up to the street upon which it is situated is a fact not only about the location of my home but about the scope and patterns of my experience and agency, and, I think, of my imaginative capacities as well. While all places have this nesting structure, not all spaces nest in the same way (Malpas 2018: 112). And consequently, not all spaces afford their inhabitants the same imaginative grasp of the intermediate spaces that connect their present circumstances to hoped-for futures outside them. A refugee detention center located on an island in the middle of a forbidding ocean or a camp in a stark, uninhabited desert seem to lack, in a significant sense, this middle ground of nested spaces that inhabitants must imaginatively traverse in order to see a way to some desired future. Consider, for example, Australia's Manus Island Regional Processing Centre, located on leased territory on an island off the coast of Papua New Guinea. Surrounded by fences and barbed wire and facing out at the broad expanse of the Pacific Ocean, detainees spent years with no experiential, perceptual, or imaginative access to the spaces surrounding them, with only the vast and unforgiving sea laying between them and their hopes for a better life on the Australian mainland. The intervening space remains, again, affectively smooth, furnishing inhabitants with no scaffolding on which their hopes could rest. Liminal spaces like Manus make opaque, indeterminate, or illegible the relation between detainees' present and any hoped-for futures – in a manner often more radical than other forms of incarceration, such as the Shawshank example highlighted earlier – undermining their ability to

[10] See Gibney (2006) and Mountz (2020: 55) for analyses of the developmental lines between Guantánamo and today's global offshore refugee detention practices.

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imaginatively fill in the intervening space with determinate, constrained ideas about how those outcomes could come about. This leaves inhabitants feeling stuck in limbo — cut off from desired future possibilities, imaginatively marooned in the space of their present, and unable to maintain hope for possibilities that they can no longer see a path towards. While (as noted in section 3) containment and isolation are features of incarceration generally, these properties are intensified in much of the contemporary asylum detention landscape. And that more radical liminality tends to put stronger pressure on refugees' ability to sustain hope.

5.4 Temporal Liminality and Imaginative Horizons

The second way in which such spaces make it difficult for displaced persons to imaginatively — and so hopefully — fill in the space between their present and some desired future is via their temporal liminality. For detained refugees, the temporal location of particular hoped-for events or possibilities — being resettled, receiving an asylum decision, even being permitted to formally apply for asylum — is often opaque or indeterminate. Our ability to imaginatively fill in the space between present and future with a sense of the way in which some possibility could come about often depends on having some understanding of the structure of that temporal period — particularly, the rough temporal location of important nodes around which other plans and possibilities could be organized. When the structure of that time is opaque and the temporal location of specific possibilities are indeterminate, we can struggle to see how things might fall into place around them in a way that would enliven our hopes. Refugees and asylum seekers housed in the kinds of liminal spaces I have described are often deprived of any such determinate grasp of their futures, and often more radically than in ordinary incarceration. Yaser, a Syrian refugee waiting with his family in a detention center on Samos in Greece, attributed the hopelessness endemic to the camp to this opacity: "I try to live from day to day, but the hopelessness really gnaws away at you. We have totally no idea how long we will have to live here" (Verhaert 2018). The issue here cannot be uncertainty, which, as I noted earlier, is constitutive of hope. But profound unclarity about when certain possibilities might occur turns the space between present and future into barren terrain — one that cannot be filled in imaginatively given the lack of determinate information about when those future possibilities might occur — and so devoid of the sort of affective scaffolding that might support one's hopes. A psychiatrist working with suicidal prisoners on Nauru echoed this analysis:

> The issue of 'indefiniteness' – that there is no timeframe for the detention process – has a strong impact on my patients' mental health. They tell me that even prisoners have a sentence – they know when they will be released, they can plan their lives. My patients don't have that. So they fear for the future, they are completely hopeless (MSF 2018: 6).

This opacity is often exacerbated by a lack of clarity about the temporal location of the present as well. Asylum seekers in Australia's detention centers on Manus and Nauru have described how the intense isolation, passivity, experiential homogeneity

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of those spaces disrupts and warps their sense of time. Describing that experiential monotony, Behrouz Boochani notes: this "is the most shocking paradox in the life of a prisoner / Time dissolving before you" (2018: 131). Benjamin, a prisoner on Nauru, similarly observed that "it's like time has been stopped," connecting this temporal distortion explicitly to the pervasive sense of hopelessness amongst those in the camp (Benjamin 2017). Part of the connection here, I think, is that it is difficult to orient oneself imaginatively to future possibilities if one does not know where one is in time, and thus in relation to those future possibilities. As I noted earlier, for many refugees their detention exists in a kind of liminal space of having departed but never having arrived. And this feeling of being in limbo, of being lost in time or feeling that time has stopped, can make the temporal interval between present and future indeterminate, or their relation opaque, such that it becomes exceedingly difficult to imaginatively see — in a sufficiently determinate and constrained way — how some desired future possibility could come about. That temporal limbo is instituted through policies and practices like indefinite detention, routine institutional delays in asylum and resettlement processes, and the general opacity of legal proceedings. But it is also instituted spatially via the extreme isolation of such spaces and their material and infrastructural poverty, which, as noted in section 4, leaves detainees with precious little in the way of activity that could structure their time.

Our ability to maintain substantial hopes often depends on our ability to imaginatively fill in the space between our present circumstances and some desired future outcome with determinate, constrained ideas about how that outcome could be realized. As refugees are detained at greater rates, and increasingly consigned to more and more liminal detention spaces, they are also increasingly deprived of imaginative access to the intermediate landscape between their present circumstances and any desired future, and this damages their hope. Instead, the space between present and future is experienced as a profound chasm: the desired end remains in view, but the way there is not. This, Kwong argues, is precisely what despair consists in (2019: 247).[11] And it maps neatly the disquieting sense of being stuck in limbo that many encamped refugees and asylum seekers report — cut off from a desired future, displaced people become stranded in a present that is often miserable and degrading.

6. Conclusion

Hope is valuable, particularly for people in difficult circumstances. It can serve as a uniquely vital source of cognitive resolve, motivation, and psychological resilience in the face of adverse conditions and a highly uncertain future. Yet, as I have argued, detention — in particular, the highly liminal forms of detention to which refugees today are increasingly consigned — tends to frustrate detainees' capacity to sustain hopes for the future. Hope is not, of course, impossible in such circumstances: since being able to imagine a way forward is not a strictly necessary condition of hoping, some individuals may be able to maintain hope in the face of low odds and intense circumstantial pressures. But that should not dissuade us from recognizing and

[11] Kwong's later distinction between hope and hopefulness, noted earlier, would instead have despair as the opposite of hopefulness, rather than hope (2020; 2024).

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articulating the ways in which certain environments are inhospitable to hoping. In this article, I have endeavored to show how the places we inhabit can impose strong environmental constraints on our capacity to maintain hope for particular outcomes. In doing so, I have also attempted to answer, at least in part, the diagnostic question raised at the outset about the prevalence of hopelessness amongst detained refugee populations. I also think this argument has paved the way for an important normative takeaway: given the profound value of hope, we should understand part of the harm of the widespread insistence on prolonged refugee detention and encampment in terms of the way it undermines detained refugees' and asylum seekers' ability to maintain hope for the future. As one critic has put it, refugees today are not simply abandoned, they are placed in "situations of imposed and institutionalized hopelessness" (Dunn 2015).[12]

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