#CloseTheCamps: Agency and Protest of United States’ Immigration Detention Centers

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“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.” - Angela Davis
On December 5th, 2019, ProPublica published video surveillance footage of the death of a teenager held in United States immigration detention. Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez was from a small town called San Jose del Rodeo in Guatemala. He was the captain of the soccer team and played four instruments. Carlos was sixteen years old when he arrived in the United States on May 13th, 2019 with his older sister. Upon arrival, he was immediately separated from his adult sister and taken to a warehouse-like processing center in McAllen, Texas. Immigration law rules that migrants should not be held in Border Patrol for more than 72 hours. Within three days of arrival, they should be transferred to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility, deported, or released pending a hearing. Most minors must be transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services within the first 72 hours. Due to an influx of border crossings, Carlos had been detained for six days when he reported that he felt ill. He was transferred to a smaller facility in Weslaco that was being used as a makeshift quarantine facility for sick migrants. At 1:00 a.m. on May 19th, Carlos saw a nurse practitioner within the facility. Tests show that he had Type A Flu and a 103-degree fever. The report of his treatment requested that Carlos “should return to medical office in 2 hours or sooner and taken to the emergency room if symptoms worsened or persisted” (ProPublica, 2019). Instead, Carlos was put in a holding cell with another ill teenager. Customs and Border Protection reported that an agent conducted wellness checks every hour throughout the night. However, the video depicts that wellness checks were conducted inadequately, if at all.

Published video footage depicts Carlos lying on the concrete bench of the holding cell with his cellmate asleep on the other bench. The whole room is made of gray concrete. Reflective Mylar blankets are strewn across the floor. At 1:22 a.m., Carlos either stands or sits
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near the window that looks out onto the office and desks of border patrol agents. He is fully or partially out of view of the security camera during this time, but it is reasonable to assume that he could have been trying to get the attention of border patrol agents. After a few minutes, he collapses face-down onto the floor near the window and the bench. At 1:33 a.m., he walks to the toilet and sits on it. He then collapses onto the floor next to the toilet on his back. Only his legs and feet are in the footage, due to the waist-high privacy partition that blocks the toilet area. For a few minutes, he moves his legs and moves more of his body into the frame. This is the last time Carlos is seen moving. The video stops at 1:47 a.m.

The second video begins at 5:48 a.m., four hours later. Carlos is in the exact same position as when the video cut off at 1:47 a.m. Police reported that the video surveillance already had a four hour gap when given to them by CBP. Customs and Border Protection has not responded to inquiries about the four hour absence of footage (ProPublica, 2019). At 6:05 a.m. his cellmate wakes up and groggily heads to the toilet, when he finds Carlos on the floor and unresponsive. His cellmate goes to the door to call a guard. A guard enters the cell, walks over to Carlos and shines a flashlight on him. He promptly but calmly leaves and re-enters two minutes later with a Border Patrol physician who finds Carlos with no pulse. The next few minutes depict various Border Patrol agents entering and exiting the cell. One of them escorts Carlos’ cellmate out of the room. ProPublica reports that photos of Carlos when he was found show a circle of blood around his head. His body had already begun to stiffen. Customs and Border Protection reports that they conducted three wellness checks on Carlos, all during the gap in video surveillance footage: at 2:02 a.m., 4:09 a.m., and 5:05 a.m. Carlos’ teacher believes that Border Patrol left him to die in his cell. ProPublica quotes him, “If you have an animal that’s sick and you’ve kept it in a room, every little while you’re going to go check on it,
see if it has water, whether it's shivering. That's with an animal. And this was a human being” (ProPublica 2019).

The day after the footage was released, Carlos’ family contacted ProPublica with their statement:

“It's been really painful for our family to lose Carlos. We thought that not knowing what happened to him in that cell, whether he was all alone when he died, whether it was preventable, that we don’t know if we can hold the people responsible accountable—that that was the worst grief we could have, but having all these people watching him die on the internet is something we couldn’t have imagined in a movie or a nightmare.” (ProPublica, 2019)

ProPublica responded by apologizing for the turmoil the video they published put Carlos’ family through. However, they emphasized that they “believe that the American people need to see this video in order to understand the actions of their government and what really happened to Carlos” (ProPublica, 2019). They did not take down the video from their website. To respect Carlos’ family’s wishes, I encourage everyone reading this paper to not watch the video. I watched the video before Carlos’ family’s statement was released. I included the description of the video in this paper to exemplify the extreme negligence of Customs and Border Protection.

Unfortunately, many other minor and adult migrants have died in the United States’ custody. Carlos’ case is unique because it is one of the few death cases in which the public has detailed information. His case speaks to the atrocities and mistreatment that most likely have happened on a wider scale and continue to happen in U.S. immigration detention centers.

Carlos is only one of seven minors that have died under the custody of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the past year. The other minors names are: Mariee Juarez, Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, Jakelin Caal Maquín, Felipe Gomez Alonzo, Juan de León
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Gutiérrez, and Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vasquez (Los Angeles Times, 2019). Prior to this, there are no reported deaths of minors in U.S. custody for over a decade. The majority of these children died from health complications contracted or worsened while in custody. The most cited illness in these cases is influenza. CBP refuses to administer flu vaccinations to migrants, citing infeasibility due to the short nature of their stay, costs, and lack of medical personnel. However, a group of doctors and various nonprofit organizations have offered to pay for and administer flu vaccines, costing the Department of Homeland Security virtually zero dollars. The Department of Homeland Security responded to calls for flu vaccinations for migrants on December 10th by tweeting “of course Border Patrol isn’t going to let a random group of radical political activists show up and start injecting people with drugs” (DHS Press Secretary Official Twitter Account).

There is an active health crisis at detention and holding centers in the United States. Until the Department of Homeland Security takes drastic measures, more minors could die in custody. It’s easy to think of these children as statistics, especially as the number of deaths increases. We all must remember their humanity: their names, their hometowns, their families, and their interests.

In recent years, immigration detention centers in the United States have garnered increased attention in the media, academic circles, activist movements, and on social media. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric throughout his campaign and into his presidency aimed to paint immigrants as the enemy of the American people. His policies and rhetoric have pushed migration issues to the center of current political discourse. Although the situation has worsened in recent years, immigration detention in the United States has always been an inhumane practice.

In 2002, the Department of Homeland Security was created as a direct response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th. There are three departments under the jurisdiction of DHS that handle immigration affairs: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Customs
and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This paper refers to CBP and ICE frequently, as USCIS only handles "authorized" immigration, such as visas, permanent residency, and naturalization. All detention centers are either owned and operated by ICE or owned by private firms that contract with ICE. The creation of these departments occurred under the second Bush administration and allowed for increased surveillance of all migrants and further criminalized "unauthorized" migration. Following the election of Barack Obama, activists and immigrants expected a progressive immigration reform. However, President Obama has deported more people than his successor -- over 5 million throughout his two terms -- and is referred to among activist circles as the "Deporter in Chief" (CNN, 2019).

President Donald Trump promised more deportations but has deported approximately 800,000 people in his first three years as President, while Obama deported 1.12 million in his first three years (The Washington Post, 2019). In May of 2018, under Trump's recommendation, the Department of Justice implemented a "Zero Tolerance Policy". Under this policy, all migrants are apprehended and prosecuted upon crossing the border without "proper authorization". This new implementation includes asylum seekers, migrants traveling with minors, and unaccompanied minors. Anyone with a criminal prosecution must be in detention, however, previous settlements prevent adults and minors from being detained in the same facilities. This policy has led to widespread separation of parents and children. In many cases, parents are not given access to speak to their children or know where they are. Children and parents were often transferred to detention centers in different states. Due to the increased number of migrants being detained, most detention center officials could not locate children's parents or parent's children upon their removal from detention (Congressional Research Service, 2019).
The goal of this paper is to shed light on the inhumane conditions of U.S. immigration detention centers and highlight how people in and outside of detention are protesting its function and existence. Immigration detention centers are designed to oppress people. Detained people live under constant surveillance with little to no contact with the outside world. All of their freedoms are stripped from them, including basic biological functions such as when and what they eat and when they sleep. In recent years, detention centers have been extremely overcrowded due to the implementation of the Zero Tolerance policy. These unsanitary and overcrowded conditions have forced people to sleep on concrete floors with the lights on 24/7. In some cases, adult detainees have had to stand for days because of lack of space to sit or lay down. Many detainees haven’t had access to soap, toothpaste, or toothbrushes for weeks at a time. It is common to go weeks without taking a shower or washing hands. The Department of Homeland Security’s Inspector General found 900 people crammed into a space designed to accommodate 125 people (Time Magazine, 2019). Unsurprisingly, these conditions have brought an outbreak of the flu, chicken pox, lice, and scabies. Dozens of migrants have died in custody.

Despite oppressive conditions and human rights violations, detained migrants exercise agency and protest every day through unique and creative methods. This paper explores the ways in which people exercise political agency and protest U.S. Immigration detention centers. Due to the intentionally secretive nature of detention centers, there remains limited knowledge of the details of the conditions inside detention centers. Very few scholars, reporters, and legislators have been given access inside. Hence, there are limited narratives available from people currently detained. The public widely receives its information on detained migrants through the news and social media. Through hashtags such as #CloseTheCamps, #NeverAgain, and #AbolishICE, activist movements continue to resist calls for detention and deportation of
migrants through disseminating materials and video evidence of mistreatment of migrants in detention via social media. Their activism has built a network of hundreds of thousands of people in the country actively protesting immigration detention centers in person and through social media organizing.

This paper is divided into three parts, categorizing protest and agency through physical location -- inside, in between, and outside the detention centers themselves. The first part, Adentro: Agency and protest inside detention centers, explores how detained child migrants exercise agency through employing unique methods of self expression and resistance. The second part utilizes the Dream 9 as an example of a movement that blurs the lines between “inside” and “outside” by intentionally infiltrating a detention center as a form of protest. Finally, the third part addresses protests on the “outside” of immigration detention through an analysis of creative protest methods utilized by grassroots movements.

Adentro: Agency and protest inside detention centers

Lauren Heidbrink is one of the few scholars that has gained access to the Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters for migrant youth in the United States. Her work takes an ethnographic approach to explain and analyze what she has witnessed, drawing significantly upon narratives of migrant youth themselves. These shelters function as glorified detention centers. They are advertised to help migrant youth and provide them a healthy and stable place to reside. In practice, children in ORR custody find themselves in a dehumanizing environment of communal living, surveillance, and restricted movement. They cannot leave the facility and they are not provided with information on where they are located geographically. They must eat what is served to them at the time it is served, they have limited access to telephones, and all of their phone calls are monitored and recorded. I argue that these shelters are functioning detention centers, branded with a different name. In this section, I draw upon Heidbrink’s work
and the stories of migrant children in ORR custody to support my claim that detained migrants employ creative strategies to protest and resist the conditions they are being held in.

The role and duties of shelter staff are often unclear. The director of the Division of Children's Services is the legal guardian of all children in ORR care. The Office of Refugee Resettlement contracts nonprofits to staff their shelters and tend to the everyday needs of the detained children. Due to this structure, staff are simultaneously treated as teachers, parents, and correctional officers. This entangled partnership between the state and NGOs jeopardizes the wellbeing of the children they claim to serve. Heidbrink exemplifies this in her article by quoting a social worker for the Department of Child and Family Services, “ORR has become a shadow welfare system that makes its own rules as it goes along with no regard to existing child welfare practices and expertise. No one is willing to shine light on what ORR really is -- a glorified warden” (Heidbrink 116).

Migrant youth are often told that they are “home” upon entering the shelter. However, the shelter is not a place for children to relax, heal, or plan for the next stages of their lives. It is what Heidbrink calls a “total institution” where “every action and reaction is subject to surveillance and documentation in the child’s ORR file” (Heidbrink 114). There are sixteen video surveillance cameras placed strategically throughout the facility, monitoring detainees’ every movement. Children can only communicate with one or two preapproved family members on the phone for twenty minutes a week. All doors and windows are locked and alarmed 24/7. With these security measures in place, the shelter functions as a panopticon. Security cameras in ORR facilities serve as the watchtower of the panopticon, purposefully visible to its subjects but its own human eyes are hidden from view. In his novel, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the prisoner of the panopticon as the recipient of asymmetrical surveillance -- “[the prisoner] is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in
Migrant youth detained in the shelter know that they could be watched at any given moment, and therefore are encouraged to police themselves. The constant threat of having their “case” being affected due to their misbehavior encourages them to follow every rule, no matter how inhumane or senseless. Despite their limited power and resources, migrant youth in ORR custody continue to exercise agency and protest their conditions in unique ways.

Heidbrink follows the story of Pascal, a sixteen year old Guinean boy who was detained after overstaying his student visa. Pascal was given what the facility calls “boot camp” -- something Heidbrink describes as “a punishment in which he must awaken early to clean all the bathrooms, assist in the kitchen, and is unable to participate in recreational activities throughout the week” (Heidbrink 122). However, Pascal regarded it as an opportunity for personal growth stating, “they think it is a punishment, but I would rather be here [in the kitchen] learning Spanish than forced to do long division I learned in fifth grade” (Heidbrink 122). Pascal exercises his agency in a discrete but important way through reframing his “punishment”. The threat of being assigned “bootcamp” no longer holds power over him, and in turn, the facility’s staff hold diminished power over Pascal’s actions and choices. If he doesn’t feel guilty for being “bad” and receiving a “punishment”, the punishment itself ceases to hold any power.

Sergio is a teenager that is also detained. He immigrated to the United States when he was very young and hardly has any recollection of the migration process or of his past in Mexico. Sergio proclaims his belonging to the United States through calling upon his cultural upbringing in the country and his English fluency to assert his presence. Rather than using his privilege to practice superiority over his peers, he uses his cultural, political, and legal knowledge to aid their immigration cases. Sergio quickly transformed into a resource for recently arrived children and “while some of his legal advice was not factually accurate, Sergio had a sophisticated understanding of immigration law, legal proceedings, and his rights, which he
freely shared based on the specific fact patterns of a child’s familial context, migration histories, and past abuses” (Heidbrink 129).

By sharing his knowledge of the immigration system, Sergio creates a community within the detention center that doesn’t rely on outside knowledge that is often limited. Through his discussions with other detained children, Sergio creates a body of communal knowledge and advice that is not hierarchical or selective. His actions, though seemingly small, are radical. Even in a space designed to confine him and render him a perpetual ‘outsider’, Sergio claimed his right to occupy space like a U.S. citizen would and held out an invitation to others who wished to pursue a life in the United States (Heidbrink 130). By claiming the United States as his land and assuming the authority to welcome others to it, he exercises agency over not only his own future, but also the future of other children who are detained. Through openly sharing legal advice, Sergio asserts his own political agency while simultaneously diminishing the power of shelter staff and the immigration industrial complex as a whole.

Pascal and Sergio serve as examples of how displaced people exercise agency and protest. They retake their personhood and personal narratives from the state that defines their very existence as “illegal” and questions their motives. Living under the conditions of the bureaucracy of the U.S. immigration system, they still manage to exercise control and power over their lives and futures. They serve as examples of ways in which detained migrants, children and adults alike, exercise personal agency and protest in an environment designed to stifle their identities and deny their human rights.

**El puente: The Dream 9**

On July 22nd, 2013, nine undocumented activists crossed the U.S.- Mexico border into Arizona as a form of protest. They lacked legal claim to enter the United States, even though they had lived there most of their lives, and for some, it’s the only place they knew. All nine
people were young Dreamers, meaning they were born in different countries but migrated to the United States without legal documentation when they were young children. They have lived the majority of their lives in the United States and think of it as home, despite their “unlawful” presence. They knew that leaving the United States and trying to gain re-entry would prove difficult and that they could possibly be deported, detained, or banned from entering for 10 years. Their goal was to draw attention to the United States’ inhumane immigration policy.

A year before this, President Barack Obama signed an executive order enacting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (NPR 2015). The Dream 9 also served as a movement to recognize thousands of could-be DACA recipients that were either deported or self-deported before DACA was enacted. María Inés Peniche was one of those people. She was 10 years old when she and her family migrated to the United States unauthorized. After finding it infeasible to pay for college, she moved back to Mexico City with her family. She would’ve been eligible for DACA had she stayed in the United States. In Mexico, she felt isolated and afraid. At the last minute, she decided to join what would become the Dream 9, as her last chance to enter the United States. Maria met with the other eight Dreamers in Nogales, Mexico. She met Lizabeth Mateo, Lulu Matínez, and Marco Saavedra, other members of the Dream 9 that left the United States just for this action. Unlike María Inés, their families and homes were still in the United States and they had absolutely everything to lose. They were organizers for the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA), the movement organizing and coordinating the Dream 9 protest. The nine activists participated in a multiple-day workshop on the Mexican side of the border, learning how to respond to Border Patrol and what to say to the media. They knew that their actions would garner attention - that was the point. They had a legal team and other activists on the “outside” to help them. They wore their caps and gowns to the border entry point, an unofficial symbol of Dreamers.
The Dream 9 entered the United States and claimed they were seeking asylum. All of them were immediately detained and transferred a few hours north to Eloy Detention Center, a private detention center owned by CoreCivic (formerly known as the Corrections Corporation of America). It has a capacity of 1,600 and makes a profit from each detainee stocked there. Men and women are housed in separate units. Between 2003 and 2016, fifteen people died in the facility, five from suicide. María Inés herself began to feel suicidal after being placed in solitary confinement, a practice proven to have intense psychological effects (American Psychological Association, 2012).

She and another Dream 9 activist, Lulu Matínez, decided to do what they could to help the women they had met inside detention. They spent the entire night writing down a hotline number for attorneys willing to help undocumented migrants’ cases. They passed slips of paper out with the number written on it and to other women detained with them, telling them that they can and should fight for their right to stay in the United States. During meal time, they stood on top of the stools in the dining hall and told other detainees about their rights. The other women began banging their fists and chanting. María and Lulu joined in with them. Guards pulled them off of their stools and escorted them into another room. They were forced to change out of the green jumpsuits they wore and into bright orange jumpsuits. The new color demarcated them as “dangerous detainees”. They were accused of trying to start a riot and put in solitary confinement. Their actions were part of their plan to agitate operations however they could and gain information on the lives of other detainees.

While in solitary, María Inés began to feel hopeless. She asked a guard if she could call her mother because she felt suicidal. The detention facility denied her request. In an interview with LatinoUSA, she attributed the Harry Potter series for helping her stay alive. It was the only book she had access to while detained (LatinoUSA, 2015). She also recounts being served
rotten and spoiled food. She would lay in her bed and think of food, "I didn't even think about how it tastes, just like, the texture of food, the color of food, the smell" (LatinoUSA, 2015).

Meanwhile outside the detention center, Mohammed Abdollahi, a Dreamer and lead organizer for NIYA, coordinated protests held outside of the detention center. Each day people from Tucson and Phoenix traveled to Eloy to garner more media attention. They stood outside shouting "bring them home". Ultimately, the Dream 9 were detained for a total of seventeen days. On August 7th, 2013 they were escorted from Eloy, driven an hour away, and released in a parking lot in the same clothing they entered the United States with, caps and gowns. They were met by family members, friends, other activists, and the media.

The Dream 9 serve as a quintessential example of bridging protest of detention centers from detainees themselves and protest from allies on the "outside". The Dream 9 activists intentionally entered detention centers as a form of agency and protest. Their radical action lessened an information gap between what goes on inside and outside detention centers. Other detainees were given information on hotlines they could call with lawyers to help their cases and reassured that there are activists on the outside fighting for detainees’ rights everyday. The Dream 9 were able to see the extreme injustices and human rights violations committed against detained people in Eloy Detention Center. Upon release, they were able to advocate on behalf of people still detained and serve as a testimony to the atrocities committed by the Department of Homeland Security (CBP and ICE).

Afuera: Allies' protest and activism

On August 14th, 2019 hundreds of protesters gathered outside of Wyatt Detention Center, a private prison in Rhode Island that contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They were organized by Never Again Action, a group of Jewish organizers that protest U.S. detention centers, their conditions, and their privatization. They film their protests
and post them on social media, often using the hashtags #NeverAgain and #CloseTheCamps. They draw on similarities between U.S. detention centers and the early stages of the Holocaust, advocating that people need to intervene and protest U.S. detention centers before the situation worsens to genocide.

Protesters wore yellow shirts, the official color of the group. They held signs with sayings such as: “Never again means now”, “Abolish ICE”, “Treat all people with respect, compassion, and love”, and “Wyatt employees, you have a choice”. They sang in unison: “we’ve got ancestors at our backs and we’ve got generations forward”. They later chanted a call and response: “When immigrant rights are under attack, what do we do?” a young woman with a megaphone shouted. “Stand up, fight back,” the crowd responded. Imam Abdelnasser Hussein, a protestor and representative of the Rhode Island Council for Muslim Advancement, spoke directly to detainees. The group of protesters outside of the detention center could see the silhouettes of detainees in the windows. Hussein spoke through a megaphone, “I’m talking to all of them inside. I wish they all hear all of us. Never again!”. “Never again,” the whole crowd shouts. “Never again!“ “Never again!” Hussein continues, “your brothers and sisters in Rhode Island are still alive and are fighting for you. Your brothers and sisters of the United States of America are still alive and fighting for you everywhere.” The crowd erupts into applause and cheers. “We are here,” he says, “we are here for you.” The people detained in Wyatt are listening from their cells on the second, third, and fourth floors. A few of them wave to the protesters and clap.

Protesters stayed on the scene for hours protesting peacefully. After the sun had set, protesters sat on the public sidewalk in small groups, blocking the entrance to the detention parking lot. A large black truck, driven by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement Officer swerved into a crowd, near a group of mostly seated individuals. Protesters screamed and tried
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to help their friends out of the way. Seated protestors stood up and tried to stop the truck by banging on its hood and windows. The truck initially slowed down, but then sped back up once protestors were standing. Two people were hospitalized as a result of the incident (The Jewish News of Northern California 2019).

Shortly after, other Wyatt correctional officers and guards arrived on the scene and deployed pepper spray on the crowd. Three people were hospitalized after being pepper sprayed. Local police stood by and did not intervene during the altercation. Never Again Action condemned this violence while also recognizing that if ICE officers feel comfortable enacting such violence upon a group of protestors they have no jurisdiction over, we must assume that the level and frequency of violence enacted upon detainees is escalated and has much more dire consequences for detainees with little recourse and power.

Never Again Action consistently employs unique and creative ways of protest including song, dance, prayer, and using their bodies as a physical barrier to block operations. Protesters at Wyatt Detention Center used their bodies as a chain to form a physical barrier at the employee parking lot entrance. They have employed this technique before. On August 1st 2019, they stood at the driveway of an ICE garage in Milwaukee, blocking vehicles carrying out deportations from exiting and entering. On October 15th, 2019, protestors danced in front of the T Don Hutto detention center in Taylor, Texas. As a protester played conga drums, an intergenerational group of people joined hands in a circle and spun around dancing while singing, “no one is illegal”.

On November 24th, 2019, Never Again Action organized a protest in Alamance, North Carolina, demanding that the county of Alamance terminate their 2.3 million dollar contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They called on the sheriff of the Alamance Police Department, Terry Johnson, to end the contact. They made coffins out of wood and painted
them black with yellow script stating, "never again is now" and "ICE out of Alamance". This symbolized their grievances with the county and ICE as well as the many migrants that have died in ICE's custody. Over 300 people marched to the detention center to drop off the coffins at their doorstep.

Before marching, Mani Lopez, an activist and representative of Siembra North Carolina (a movement of Latinx people protesting the conditions of detention centers), spoke to the crowd with personal stories of sexual harassment in ICE custody. After, the group gathered in prayer and by singing Ozi V'Zimrat Yah in Hebrew, which translates to "my Lord is my strength and song; and He has become my salvation". Edith, a Latina member of the community that has been detained in U.S. detention centers in the past, also spoke to the group. She spoke upon her personal experience, "the sadness for me was that my nieces and children were outside the jail crying. Terry Johnson does not care about the pain of children. I hope that Terry Johnson never has to go through the pain that I have lived and that many of you here have lived." Before departing for their march, they sang a trilingual song in Spanish, English, and Hebrew. They sang: "oye mi gente, traemos la fuerza, la libertad es mi única bandera; rise up my people, my condors, my eagles, no human being is illegal."

As they marched they chanted, "ICE escucha, estamos en la lucha". They had only marched 30 yards before being blocked by police officers dressed in riot gear. Protesters placed the coffins on the ground in front of the police vehicles and sat in the street. They continued their protest peacefully and without violence, but refusing to give up or go home. They engaged in a traditional Jewish mourning service, known as shiva. They sang in unison:

"people gonna rise like water, gonna take this system down
I hear the voice of my great grandmother say never again is now"
"we're mourning our loved ones, we shall not be moved"
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*just like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved*

Movements like Never Again Action exemplify the importance of the work of allies and advocates for immigrants' rights. They are able to use their freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and freedom to assemble in ways that would be impossible for detained migrants to do. They use their privilege to stand up to systems of power and call out injustice. Their use of creative methods of protesting, such as song, dance, prayer, the use of physical props, and the use of their bodies as physical barriers has caught the attention of a wide audience. By posting their videos and demands to social media with searchable hashtags, more and more people each day are introduced to and join the cause.

Despite inhumane conditions in U.S. immigration detention centers, this paper has explored a few ways in which migrant detainees exercise their political and personal agency to protest their conditions using limited resources. Children and adults alike employ creative and unique techniques to assert their power and belonging while operating under a dehumanizing and oppressive system that was designed to repress their individuality and deny their human rights. Similarly, immigrant allies and advocates have created movements to call attention to the atrocities being committed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection in detention centers.
Works Cited


