
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Hunger Strike to Death: The Politics of Necroresistance in Ron Kovic's *Hurricane Street*

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| ABSTRACT

Disabled Vietnam veteran activist Ron Kovic second memoir *Hurricane Street* (2016) has not garnered the same widespread recognition and readership as *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) despite addressing a significant event in disabled veterans' political history—namely, a hunger strike. The uneven popularity between the two memoirs underscores the existing gap between culturally normalized practices of doing politics among the disabled veterans' community. While disabled veteran activists have a long history of weaponizing their bodies to express antiwar political statements, hunger strikes have not been a commonly utilized tactic in their activism or remain limited to isolated cases, resulting in a scattered and fragmented understanding of this form of protest. The paper aims to clarify the untapped potential of hunger strikes as a means of political expression for disabled veteran activists. Specifically, it aims to investigate the role of the hunger strike in Kovic's *Hurricane Street*, exploring its potential and limitations in helping him navigate the complexities of his war disability. Drawing on Banu Bargu's theories of necroresistance, this paper argues that Kovic's protest is a life-affirming manifestation of defiance against the state injustice and an awakening of public consciousness. By delving into Kovic's experiences and the impact of his hunger strike, this study sheds light on the intersection of disability, activism, and personal identity within the veteran community.

| KEYWORDS

Hunger strike, Vietnam War, Ron Kovic, *Hurricane Street*, war disability, necroresistance, Banu Bargu

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1. Introduction

Ron Kovic, a disabled Vietnam veteran turned into an activist, is perhaps more known for interrupting the 1972 Republican National Convention at the Convention Center in Miami Beach, Florida, than the 19-day hunger strike he staged in the office of Senator Alan Cranston in one of West Los Angeles Federal Buildings in 1974. The fact that Kovic's first memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), endures more popularity than *Hurricane Street* (2016) that memorializes the hunger strike, testifies to the existing gap between culturally normalized practices of doing politics among disabled veterans. While disabled veteran activists have always made their bodies speak for their antiwar political statements, hunger strikes are less visible or unified as their other embodied antiwar efforts. The literature on war disability and hunger strikes exists as isolated cases at best and as result, remains widely scattered and fragmented (Sweeney, 2004, p. 341). In parallel, scholarship on hunger strikes as an act of resistance at an individual and collective level since the nineteenth century onward is primarily reserved for the penitentiary system that appeared formally among Irish nationalists and British suffragettes (Siméant, 2016, p. 19). Although it is the prison-based collective action that eventually contributes to hunger strike development and popularization, hunger strikes have historically been employed to bring attention to civil and human rights issues, outside of prison walls, too. Disabled veterans' resort to hunger strikes, however, needs to be acknowledged and recognized.

The aim of this paper is to examine how hunger strikes fit into a broader discussion of politicizing disabled veteran bodies. More specifically, the paper attends to the words and the experience of Ron Kovic in his 2016 memoir *Hurricane Street* to identify the ways in which Kovic's nonviolent act of hunger strike serves to navigate the complexities of his war disability and how it shapes his

sense of self and his place in the community. Drawing on Banu Bargu's theories of necroresistance in *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Bodies* (2014), I read Ron Kovic's act of resistance as both life-affirming and life-negating. Through the manipulative performativity of the hunger strike, Kovic engages in an exercise of defiance against the structural necropolitics of the state, allowing him to take control of his own right to live or die. It is also an expression of autonomy and agency, a way of asserting a sense of self-determination in an otherwise oppressive environment. In the absence of equal rights, resources, and state and popular support—the hunger strike cultivates a virtue of necessity to confront the government's failures and shortcomings. Bargu's work on weaponized bodies provides an analytical framework for understanding the transformative power of self-sacrifice and self-violence, both of which underlie hunger strikes. This study is only limited to hunger striking in the singularity of the experience of Ron Kovic instead of hunger striking as a social movement among disabled veterans. The unique physical hardship of disabled veterans does not allow hunger strikes to become a standard social practice among them. As disabled veterans continue to grapple with myriad complexities, it is imperative to explore all their acts of protest, including ones that are both effective and more self-destructive, and demonstrate that the pursuit of justice and change does sometimes come at the cost of one's own life. Given the unique challenges that disabled veterans face, this inquiry is important in that it bears intimate witness to disabled veterans weaponizing their own bodies to reclaim a narrative of military service and integration of their own making. By willingly subjecting themselves to the risk of death through starvation, disabled veterans' hunger strikers disrupt the normalized representation of them as either heroes or burdens.

2. Literature Review

Many existing studies in the broader literature have examined the exclusion of disabled veterans from American military history despite wars' lethal role in creating disabilities (Gerber, 2012, p. 23; Kinder, 2015, p. 3). The lack of recognition and the pervasive inaccurate stereotype representation have made it difficult for disabled veterans to access meaningful services, find employment, and fully integrate into society. It is the disabled veterans' activism and advocacy for their rights to a normalized existence that contribute to creating inclusive environments, ensuring equal opportunities, and breaking down the barriers that limit their full participation in society.

John Kinder traces the troubling legacy of war disabilities that have haunted America since the American Revolution and the Civil War to recent wars on terror. Devoting the bulk of *Paying with Their Bodies* (2015) to the shadow of World War I in shaping the development of veterans' care, Kinder—in the epilogue—is chiefly concerned with the illusion of safety in the twentieth-first-century war that foreign policy seems to advocate (p. 287). The technological and social progress made in the US military over the last twenty years has had a profound impact on the ways wars are fought, and on the physical, psychological, and social repercussions for those who are involved in them. The tendency towards glorifying war in the traditional narrative persists still and risks perpetuating the dangerous cycle of veterans returning home disabled and misrepresented. Every new generation of veterans, Kinder argues, finds it their own responsibility to carry on the legacy of their predecessors and advocate for increased support and aid (p. 289).

While Kinder's book focuses on the First World War as the moment when disabled veterans began to organize and fight for their rights, Jennings Audra (2016) points to the Second World War as the pivotal moment in the history of disability rights for veterans (p. 9). She argues that disability politics and activism have a longer history than previously thought, long before the Vietnam War. Disability activism among veterans had its origins in the World War II era with the emergence of a distinct disability politics that was rooted in the experiences of disabled veterans, their families, and other civilian disabled. The American Federation of the Physically Handicapped (AFPH) was able to bring the disability rights movement to the forefront, setting the stage for the passage of landmark legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (p. 133). Its collaboration with organized labour movements was instrumental in introducing affirmative action programs for disabled veterans and workers and raising awareness of the pressing needs of the disability community for better healthcare and education access (p. 3). The history of American disabled veterans, as both Kinder and Jennings confirm, is one of self-determination, activism, and resilience. It has long been the advocacy of veterans' organizations that has helped disabled veterans confront state policy problems through lobbying, public relations, and protests. Despite the significance of their engagements with politics, hunger strikes as a form of protest among disabled veterans are almost marginalized.

Hunger strikes have a long history of being used as a means of protest and resistance. There exists a considerable body of literature on the entanglement of hunger strikes in the religious practice of fasting. While both hunger strikes and religious fasting involve abstaining from food, the underlying motivations and objectives differ significantly. Hunger strikes are driven by a desire for social or political change, using the body temporarily as a tool to bring attention to a cause. In contrast, religious fasting is a rooted spiritual practice observed by many faiths, often as a form of devotion, penance, purification, or self-discipline (Chakrabarty, 2006, p. 68; Shah, 2022, p. 1; Sweeney, 2004, p. 337). This religious dimension lends a sense of sanctity and righteousness to hunger strikes, elevating them beyond mere secular acts of protest.

Along the same line of thought, a strand of literature looks at hunger strikes through the prism of religious iconography of martyrdom and self-immolation. Hunger striking, as a form of altruistic suicide, represents a unique method of self-sacrifice employed by individuals who create a crisis that transcends their physical beings, making their bodies the very battleground upon which their struggle unfolds. K. M. Fierke (2013) contends that Christian martyrdom is not easily equated with hunger strikes, and their relationship is far more complex. Hunger strikes not only become secular and worldly, but they also embody a paradox of sacrificing oneself for the maximization of one best self-interest (p. 76). In other words, the hunger strike is simultaneously individualistic and selfless. Likewise, both Michael Biggs (2008, p. 23) and Lionel Wee (2007, p. 72) exclude hunger strikes from acts of self-sacrifice, arguing that self-immolation involves an immediate and irreversible action that cannot be inverted, whereas a hunger strike can be stopped at any time and the strikers can be saved if their demands met and received medical treatment. Slightly from another perspective, Bargu Banu (2013) asserts that self-destructive violence, though a hunger strike, is overshadowed by the radical politics of suicide bombers (p. 804). While hunger strikes are sometimes reconfigured in the literature as a form of suicide, they are more accurately seen as a form of protest. Nayan Shah (2022) clarifies that the results of suicide and other acts of self-immolation are rapid and immediate death, whereas a hunger strike is an act of a prolonged slow death, and there is always a possibility of leveraging the strike or bringing it to an end (p. 2). George Sweeney (1993) draws attention to the fact that the hunger striker's desire to stay alive is greater than his desire to die. A hunger strike, in this light, is only used as a weapon of last resort after all other available actions are exhausted (p. 428).

While hunger striking has been popularized particularly within the past twenty-five years, "the sacrificial motif" is particularly intrinsic to Irish history and mythology (Sweeney, 1993, p. 423). In fact, Northern Ireland looms large in most of the literature on hunger strikes. Yet, the use of hunger strikes as a form of civil disobedience in a variety of political contexts has been well documented. Shah (2022) examines a dozen episodes of hunger strikes in various English-speaking contexts by tracing the history of the nation-state and the crisis over the structural inequalities that have deprived citizens of their right to full participation in democracy and prevented the government from being held accountable (p. 18). Citing World War II as a turning point regarding its limited capabilities for democratic possibilities, Shah argues that the hunger strike was repurposed as a strong statement of intent and a powerful challenge to the status quo to ensure a more equitable future for all (p. 17). By doing so, hunger strikes challenge the traditional power of the state and demand international recognition of human rights (p. 18). Likewise, Kevin Grant (2019) illustrates the ripple effects of hunger within the British Empire from Britain to Ireland to India, powerfully illuminating the wider implications of hunger and its role in shaping imperial history (p. 3). Grant demonstrates how the protest eventually spread to other parts of the British Empire, thus indicating the far-reaching effects of hunger and its political, cultural, and legal ramifications.

Examining hunger strikes in the longer history of Palestinian resistance to Israeli colonialism and occupation, Ashjan Ajour (2021) provides an explanation of how the hunger strikers use their bodies to express their resistance and how this eventually serves as an impetus for revolutionary subjectivity (p. 9). She also examines the ways in which the hunger strikers were able to move beyond the traditional political understandings of struggle and create a spiritualized understanding of the strike. These acts of resistance challenge the narrative that portrays Palestinians solely as victims and instead highlight their agency and determination to reclaim their rights and dignity (p. 10).

Hunger strikes, also, have been the subject of debates among medical professionals. Fessler D. (2003) contends that the duty to preserve life and the obligation to respect patient autonomy are at odds in circumstances of hunger strikes for medical personnel. While medical intervention is only humane and has no political agenda, physicians continue to grapple with their ethics and obligations, seeking to find a balance between supporting individuals' rights and safeguarding their health (243). In the same manner, Dolores Dooley-Clarke (1981) elaborates more on this issue in the cases where hunger strikers are in a prolonged loss of consciousness and become therefore legally unable to refuse treatment or force feeding. Because of the autonomy that patients have in making their own medical decisions only while conscious, even family members do not have the legal authority to override the patient's wishes and compel medical personnel to save the patient's life (p. 7).

Besides that, a series of recent studies investigate hunger strikes through the lens of postcolonial literature, shedding light on the ways in which hunger serves as a powerful metaphor for the postcolonial condition. Muzna Rahman (2022) argues that the colonial and imperial legacies of food insecurity have created gendered power relationships that have limited access to food, resulting in a lack of bodily autonomy. By analysing the ways in which the colonial body is constructed and regulated through political, economic, and ideological discourses, Rahman challenges traditional understandings of the starving colonial body as a passive victim of oppression and instead examines the potential for the body to be a site of resistance and transformation (p. 3). Similarly, Timothy Wientzen (2015) asserts the body's key significance in the emerging formal projects of modernist fiction. As embodiment has been emphasized throughout modernist history, hunger strikes are rooted in a political understanding of the role of the body in a global economy. Instead of being a metaphor for modern degradations, hunger becomes a politically charged concept. Imaginative hunger strikes make a statement of the body's vulnerability to the power of the state, and its power to make a

statement against it (p. 209). Through this act of extreme body discipline, the striker can challenge the state's power and make a statement of protest.

A hunger strike is a powerful form of protest that has been utilized by individuals and groups throughout history to bring attention to their causes in order to advocate for change. While hunger strikes are often associated with political movements and social justice issues, their significance for the disabled community is usually overlooked. Hunger strikes have the potential to shine a spotlight on the unique challenges faced by disabled individuals and serve as a catalyst for social and policy reforms that can improve their lives.

3. Methodology

The concept of weaponizing the body has taken on a new and disturbing form - the self-destructive hunger strike. This extreme form of protest has been employed by vulnerable individuals as a technology of political resistance to draw attention to their cause and to expose the truth about their disadvantaged experiential life and the truth of state exceptional violence. Banu Bargu, a political theorist, offers a thought-provoking analysis of hunger strikes in her book *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (2014). She argues that hunger strikers defy the boundaries of traditional politics by engaging in a radical form of violence against themselves (Bargu, 2014, p. 6).

Emboldened by the ideology of sacrifice, politicized hunger or fast endows strikers with a "a theological conception of militancy" (Bargu, 2014, p. 300). The strong conviction of the pressing need to bring their cause to light as their last chance is the fuelling drive to persist with unwavering commitment until their mission is accomplished, regardless of the personal cost. Strikers persist in their physical suffering only because they believe they can win their demands and call their hunger strike to an end before they die. Death is a risk they take, a possible and likely outcome but not a certain one. The powerful symbolic resonance of sacrifice in this act of self-destruction allows it to take on a greater significance than the other self-destructive act of suicide. The weaponization of life is not, contends Bargu, a choice between life or death, but rather a choice of living on one's own terms or living in a society with predetermined rules and ideologies (Bargu, 2014, p. 300).

In this light, Bargu proposes that hunger strikers' bodies serve as a symbol of a major difference between leading a biological existence or a political one. Since, for many strikers, it is the death of one's own beliefs and convictions that becomes the real equivalent to death, the physical death is redeemed inconsequential and insignificant (Bargu, 2014, p. 301). Physical existence is sacrificed in pursuit of political existence. The physical body is denounced as merely a vessel for life and death, worthy only for the purpose of conveying a political voice otherwise inaudible. Self-inflicted violence, thus, is transformed into a resourceful value detached from the real suffering that the body endures. Strikers are making a revolutionary gesture by choosing to live a politically defined life, as opposed to biologically defined lives that are valued by authorities.

Hunger strikes necessarily entail a reappropriation of body ownership. The power of hunger striking lies in its ability to challenge the established order and disrupt the systems of control that have oppressed individuals for far too long. It embodies the idea that the body, despite being subjected to external forces, can become a powerful tool for resistance and change. What becomes important in these dynamics of reversal and reappropriation is the power of the strikers to hold separate their political identities from their bodies (Bargu, 2014, p. 282). It is the body that endures starvation while the identity that belongs to that body seeks to remain intact. An individual's dignity refuses to become reducible to his body. The striker denaturalizes state authority's integration of national identity, allowing for a critical reflection on the partnership between power and leadership that is often assumed. These mental reworkings transform political-minded individuals from being passive victims of states into active agents of resistance.

By subverting the logic of state biopower and necropower, hunger strikers intentionally and consciously reduce their bodies to a state of helplessness at the mercy of the sovereign power that assigns its citizens their rights to live or die (Bargu, 2014, p. 274). This creates an ethical dilemma for the state that must decide whether to acknowledge the strikers' right to live on their own terms or to risk public condemnation for its moral apathy. A hunger strike serves to challenge the state's legitimacy by revealing its limits of control and domination. As the public gaze observes the body's detrimental self-consumption, it is also drawn to the authority's (un)willingness to compromise in response to calls for moral and civil recognition. The strike, as a result, becomes a symbol of individual struggle for autonomy as well as a symbol of collective resistance (Bargu, 2014, p. 307). The act of exercising such individual sovereignty becomes the foundation of a revolutionary society, transforming the collective's relationship with a politically charged death.

In her argument on necroresistance and bare life, Bargu claims that necroresistance is "not a resistance of bare life but a resistance to bare life [emphasis in the original]" (Bargu, 2014, p. 81). In other words, self-destructive resistive acts are not acts of resistance of bare existence based on individuals' position of vulnerability and exclusion. This view of necroresistance puts emphasis on the importance of survival for oppressed people as a way of affirming the value of life for those who are often treated as disposable.

Necroresistance, instead, proceeds from the power of and over death by embracing it and engaging with it in order to contest the power of and over life (Bargu, 2014, p. 86). Death, here, is being coopted as a counter conduct to the state's regular administration of life. Rather than perceiving their bodies as mere objects of violence, necroresisters refuse to accept a life that does not live up to their ideals of justice and equity.

Self-destruction through hunger strike is an assertion of the "right to die" and stands as a resolute defiance against injustice. It is a manifestation of a deep-seated desire to no longer be subjected to the oppressive forces of a system that perpetuates inequality and suffering. By choosing to self-destruct, individuals are making a powerful statement, challenging the very foundations upon which the system of sovereignty is built.

4. Results and Discussion

Hurricane Street memoir presents a brief and compelling account of Ron Kovic early 1970s activism, which culminated in a sit-in and a 19-day hunger strike with seven other veterans in the office of Senator Alan Cranston in 1974, protesting the poor quality of treatment at the Long Beach VA hospital, California, requesting a serious investigation of all Veteran Administrations, and a face-to-face meeting with the head of Veteran Affairs, Donald A. Johnson. While the hunger strike lies at the heart of *Hurricane Street*, it is utilized as one effective method within the broader American Veterans Movement Kovic secretly organized during his stay at the hospital's Spinal Cord Injury ward (SCI) aimed to voice discontent and draw attention to the inadequate treatment of disabled veterans. The SCI ward serves as a significant junction for Kovic, as well as other disabled veterans, where the distinction between life and death becomes indistinct, giving birth to a ground-breaking form of subjectivity.

Kovic's personal experiences and observations in the VA hospitals spurred his later acts of protest to bring awareness to the aims of the American Veterans Movement. His vivid descriptions capture the despair and hopelessness that permeate the lives of the men who share his fate as they bear the weight of their shattered dreams, their spirits crushed under the burden of their paralyzed bodies: "They are weary men in every way, seeming to have lost all hope. Their lives are over, their youth has been crushed, defiled, and destroyed. Unlike myself, they do not rage. They do not protest or dream of revolt. They simply surrender to their defeat, to their paralyzed bodies" (Kovic, 2016, p. 42). Unlike his friends, who may have taken a more conventional approach to seeking support and assistance, Kovic was fearless and unapologetic in advocating for change. He was determined to give a voice to the voiceless during a time when veterans were punished for speaking out: "Some of the aides and nurses started threatening the guys with lobotomies and shock treatment, handing out pills like candy, drugging those who complained, until they were too numb to speak out" (Kovic, 2016, p. 70). As the gravity of disabled veterans' situation becomes more evident, the need for Kovic to understand their experiences and perspectives becomes urgent.

This realization leads to a shift in his approach from mere observation to conducting long interviews. The sheer volume of interviews and his role as an investigative reporter, even from the confines of his gurney, has kept him busy and it fills him with a renewed sense of purpose: "I listen to one horror story after another and promise myself that someday people are going to know what is happening in this place. If it is the last thing I do, I will somehow find a way to expose it" (Kovic, 2016, p. 42). Kovic instantly assigns himself a representative figure for other disabled veterans; their precarious and fragile existence will be used as a testament to the state's record of failures and unjustified violence.

Kovic's hunger strike was not initially envisioned as a part of his revolutionary politics. It arose as a spontaneous response to the injustice and maltreatment that he experienced and witnessed. The unplanned nature of the hunger strike catalyses a radical shift in Kovic's approach to activism and demonstrates the organic nature of Kovic's evolution as an activist. The decision was not taken lightly: "Maybe it's an act of desperation. Maybe it's simply that I have nothing left to lose, but even as I say these words, I know that I have stepped over a line where there will be no going back, no return to things as they once were" (Kovic, 2016, p. 105). Despite the risks involved, he recognizes the importance of shedding light on the issues plaguing the Veteran Affairs system by any means necessary. The decision to resort to a hunger strike, despite its inherent dangers, speaks volumes about the severity of the situation at hand and "signals that something is profoundly wrong with the world" (Bargu, 2014, p. 90). Kovic's concern builds up quickly around the question of whether his already state-ravaged body will exist or not: "And in those first few days, I'd been worried about the fact that I was risking my health and the health of others around me. Granted, a part of me was willing to sacrifice myself for a cause I believed in, but at the same time I knew deep in my heart that I wanted to live" (Kovic, 2016, p. 97). The hunger striker's refusal to succumb to hunger is not a call for death but a call for life - a radical life that transcends physical survival.

Human weapons often rebel against "the administration of life and the calculation of power that takes life as its object" (Bargu, 2014, p. 22). Necropolitics goes beyond the traditional understanding of politics as the exercise of power over life and examines how sovereign power wields its authority to determine whose lives are expendable. The Veteran Health Administration becomes a necropower, becoming a force that no longer prioritizes the well-being of its patients. It is a power that operates beyond the legal

framework and operates in a state of exception, where medical ethics and standard of care are suspended. Disabled veteran bodies are deemed disposable, expendable, and outside the dominant social order. Necroresistance is a contestation of this form of power as individuals “take the determination of life and death into their own hands, thereby disrupting the normative functioning of power” (Bargu, 2014, p. 75). By choosing to expose and utilize his vulnerability, Kovic challenges the American state’s monopolistic claims over whose lives are to be valued and protected and whose are to be marginalized or eliminated: “We might be paralyzed and confined to wheelchairs for the rest of our lives, but we have discovered a sense of pride and self-worth we haven’t felt since being injured. And as I have felt myself change, I have seen with my own eyes the transformative power of our willingness to risk our lives for what we believe in” (Kovic, 2016, p. 71). The notion of reclaiming agency is powerfully embodied here, where Kovic transitions from being a mere object to an active subject, challenging the very system that objectified, took advantage of, mutilated, and neglected him and countless others. Taking control of one’s life and death and politicizing objecthood through a hunger strike becomes an assertion of subjecthood, autonomy, and self-determination.

Such an act is not to be misconstrued as mere desperation but as a strategic and agonistic form of political praxis. “The weaponization of the body is not a retreat into the biological but a highly politicized employment of it” (Bargu, 2014, p. 80). Kovic’s hunger strike represents an extraordinary example of how one asserts a political existence over a biological one. At the most superficial level, Kovic’s biological existence post-injury is fundamentally precarious. After returning from the Vietnam War paralyzed from the chest down, Kovic faces a form of life where his body could easily have been reduced to its biological existence, made passive by its own limitations and by societal structures designed to marginalize him. His life could easily have been circumscribed by the medical interventions and caretaking routines that maintained his biological functions. Kovic, however, refuses to be reduced to his body’s limitations and decides to move beyond the mere biological existence dictated by the state’s necropolitical control: “after all the frustrations and confinement, in and out of bed, fevers, IVs, wetting your pants, soiling the sheets, you are still here, still in this world” (Kovic, 2016, p. 20). It is the assertion of his own right of existence in the world that he subverts the imposed “social death” and creates for himself a space for new forms of political organizing (Bargu, 2014, p. 100). He transforms his body into a symbolic battleground against the very war that crippled him, thereby reclaiming it as an active, political entity. His paralyzed, starving body becomes the living canvas upon which he sketches a poignant critique of American militarism: “No longer will we be hidden away in their hospitals and told we are crazy for complaining about the way we’re being treated. We will be listened to now” (Kovic, 2016, p. 99). In this sense, he makes a conscious choice to weaponize his body for his cause in direct opposition to the way his body was weaponized and then disabled for his country. His body becomes a site of politics, and Kovic places his biological life on the line to achieve this.

The affirmation of a political existence also necessitates the separation of the body from its identity. Initially, Kovic’s identity was deeply interlinked with his physical capabilities; he was a soldier and a Marine, and his bodily prowess was a key aspect of his self-conception that participation in the war was framed in terms of corporeal service to his country, which subsequently gets shattered along with his spine, leaving him all alone with “the tears, the dread and rage, the feeling that there is no God, no country, nothing but the wound, the horrifying memories, the shock, the guilt, the shame” (Kovic, 2016a, p. 59). Following his injury, Kovic undergoes a sort of metamorphosis, both physical and psychological. One would assume that the loss of bodily function would reduce his ability to be politically active or to express an identity beyond that of a paralyzed veteran. However, for Kovic, his injury does not diminish his political engagement: “I now believe I have suffered for a reason, and in many ways I have found that reason in my commitment to peace and nonviolence. My life has been a blessing in disguise, even with the pain and great difficulty that my physical disability continues to bring. It is a blessing to be able to speak on behalf of peace” (Kovic, 2016a, p. 26). This commitment to peace is further manifested in his act of the hunger strike, in which the body’s fundamental drive to sustain itself is decoupled from his political identity of resistance. The paralytic, then-hungry body of Kovic challenges societal norms and political narratives by the sheer force of its existence, bearing witness to the brutality of war and the callousness of a society willing to discard its veterans once they are no longer physically able to serve.

Kovic’s journey of starvation can be seen as an exercise in the form of secular sanctity, where the lines between the political and the spiritual blur. This imbues his activism with a sense of moral urgency and an existential gravitas that is resonant with a divine urgency. Kovic initially embraces martyrdom within the context of patriotic sacrifice. Before his life-altering injury, Kovic’s willingness to die for his country reflects the ultimate sacrifice, one that is grounded in what he believes is a collective ethos of national duty. Raised in a Roman Catholic household, Kovic had initially viewed his role in the Vietnam War through the lens of a ‘crusader,’ stating that “I loved God more than anything else in the world back then and I prayed to Him and the Virgin Mary and Jesus and all the saints to be a good boy and a good American (Kovic, 2016a, p. 65). His war experiences and subsequent paralysis led to a crisis of faith, one that would eventually fuel a renewed, albeit radically different, form of self-sacrifice, one aimed at preventing future acts of senseless martyrdom: “Everything was being questioned, nothing was sacred, even the existence of God was now suspect. The very earth beneath my feet seemed to be shifting, and there no longer seemed to be any guarantees, or anything that could be trusted or believed in anymore” (Kovic, 2016b, p. 16). While he may have lost faith in the religious constructs

he grew up with, his commitment to anti-war activism and veterans' rights takes on the quality of a religious quest for redemption and justice.

It is in the hospital that Kovic's ethical stand diverges significantly from his earlier conceptions of duty and sacrifice. Kovic speaks of this transformation saying, "I feel helpless and afraid. After everything I went through in the war and the hospital, I have begun to wonder whether there is a God or not. Yet, out of sheer desperation, I start to pray" (Kovic, 2016b, p. 38). The transformation in Kovic's belief system is evident in *Hurricane Street*, where he grapples with questions of good and evil, right, and wrong, justice and injustice—questions that transcend the merely political and enter the realm of the theological. In the absence of an explicitly religious framework, 'theological militancy' inherent in Kovic's hunger strike suggests a struggle that is deeply rooted in the metaphysical, transcending the boundaries of mere biological existence and political resistance. Kovic operates with a sense of divine mission, positioning their struggles not just against temporal powers but against a cosmic backdrop. For Bargu, theological militancy becomes a crucial factor that underlines the human weapons' engagement in "acts of life" rather than "acts of death," framing their actions as sacrifices for a higher cause (Bargu, 2014, p. 145). The politics of Kovic's hunger strike constitutes a critique of the prevailing systems and values that authorize and glorify forms of institutionalized violence and sacrifice—namely, the war machine. It also represents an ethic that is deeply intertwined with collective memory and an aspirational vision that goes beyond the sacrifice of one individual, becoming a metonym for the larger struggle of the disabled community.

The use of the body as a communicative medium is a pivotal component in that it engenders a non-verbal communication, where the body conveys emotions and meanings in ways that mere words cannot. Starvation becomes a statement that is as loudly heard as any speech. Kovic said: "I chose the hunger strike as a tactic because I knew it would be dramatic and hopefully bring us attention. It was a desperate move, but what could I do?" (Kovic, 2016b, p. 125). Kovic's use of both speech and bodily presence underscores "a form of communication that operates alongside and beyond verbal articulation, involving the entirety of the individual in the political act" (Bargu, 2014, p. 116). He, thus, is doubly articulate, conveying effective resistance through the words he chooses and the starving body he inhabits. Each is a form of language, and each has its syntax and semantics in the political grammar that Bargu describes. The realm of aesthetics often goes unnoticed when discussing acts of political resistance, yet it is crucial for understanding the performative aspects that give resistance its communicative power. Kovic describes the collapse of one of the veterans, Nick, during an afternoon press conference: "It is really quite a scene, with the paramedics rushing right in during the middle of it all and lifting Nick onto a stretcher. All the networks are filming it. The press is going crazy" (Kovic, 2016b, p. 163). Such scenes are not peripheral but central to understanding how resistance can be staged and understood, a chance that opens new avenues for interpreting acts of political defiance and social change.

Bargu discusses the aesthetics of resistance as being intricately tied to political acts: "The aesthetic dimension of these actions, encompassing dress, demeanor, and choreographed performances, reinforces the politics of the act" (Bargu, 2014, p. 230). The strategic juxtaposition of now starved bodies of men, flags, and banners written in bold red lipstick hung above bathroom toilet along with the countdown of the days on the Federal Building large-plate glass window in the federal building stir emotions and evoke sympathetic responses from onlookers. The scattered blankets and mattresses, similarly, serve as a complex aesthetic performance that, through its symbolism and performative nature, amplifies the message of resistance viscerally and undeniably. Exposing vulnerable bodies is not merely a political act but a multi-dimensional aesthetic experience aimed at stirring emotions and thought, thereby encouraging a striking re-imagining of social and political landscapes.

The 19-day hunger strike's duration sparked heightened awareness and garnered significant media attention. The coverage provided by ABC, KABC, CBS, Evening News, and NBC played a crucial role in shifting public sentiment, propelling the strikers' cause into the spotlight. Through the power of these news outlets, the voices of the hunger strikers resonate with the broader public, leading to increased understanding, support, and ultimately, a change in public opinion. This proves true when VA Chief, Donald Johnson, refused to engage in a discussion with the protesting veterans in the 13th floor office, which caused a stalemate in resolving the ongoing protest. While Kovic and the other veterans have expressed their disappointment and frustration at Johnson's unwillingness to engage with them directly, it is the media coverage that played a significant role in shaping public sentiment, which gradually began to favour the strikers and their cause. Despite flying from Washington specifically to meet with the dissident veterans, Johnson's unwillingness to move from the 7th floor to the 13th floor has raised questions in the press about his commitment to addressing the veterans' grievances (Kovic, 2016b, 172). This tension is eventually resolved when Johnson, under mounting pressure, finally met them and agreed to their demands to include annual inspections of Veteran Affairs hospitals and the establishment of a national hotline to help veterans cut through red tape.

The hunger strike, though challenging, ultimately proved to be a success. The Federal Building, with its imposing architecture and symbolism of the government's influence and control, has undergone a profound change, becoming a powerful symbol of hope and unity. The iconic photograph, in a front-page story in the *Los Angeles*, of Bobby Mays pushing Ron Kovic on his wheelchair out the front door of the Federal Building confirms the end of the strike and a victory (Kovic, 2016b, 189). The photograph serves

as a testament to their impactful work and the transformation of a once formidable institution into a beacon of hope for those seeking a better inclusive politics. In fact, the success of Kovic's hunger strike and the failure of his planned marching to the White House and taking The Washington Monument down both highlight the profound potential of self-induced violence on the human body in the political landscape (Kovic, 2016b, 204).

But the hunger strike is not without its own set of drawbacks. Once the hunger strike is called to an end, media attention seems to dissipate, making it challenging for Kovic's cause to remain in the public consciousness. Without sustained media coverage and public engagement, the hunger strike fails to create lasting change or generate long-term outcomes: "For a long time after the strike ended, I felt anxious every time I went down to the hospital, thinking someone was going to start yelling at me, cursing me out, or threatening my life" (Kovic, 2016b, 231). Despite its extreme nature, the effect of the strike is short lived, particularly after Kovic demands are met, and its momentum diminishes. This perhaps explains Kovic's insistence on historicizing the strike: "Back then I sensed the need, even in the most minimal way, to record the history of the strike. I figured somebody had to try to tell this story while they still could" (Kovic, 2016b, p. 8). The historicizing of hunger strikes is crucial for comprehending their complexities and challenges and to shed light on the physical, emotional, and psychological toll that such a protest can have on strikers and communities in the long run. The emotional impact of Kovic's narrative is deeply felt in the epilogue where he provides tragic updates on the fates of his fellow strikers disabled veterans. The stories of disabled strikers lost to tragic suicides and mental health complications draw the reader into a world of profound suffering and loss. Kovic's ability to expose his vulnerabilities as a disabled veteran struggling how to navigate the path ahead after the strike, alongside other vulnerable disabled veterans, bolsters his credibility not only as a writer but also as an activist.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to closely analyse Ron Kovic's memoir *Hurricane Street* to reveal the impact of his nonviolent act of hunger strike in navigating the complexities of his war disability. The analysis has shown that the hunger strike stands out as a defining moment in Kovic's relentless fight for recognition. Not only does it draw attention to his cause, but it also shapes his personal and political identity. Through this act of protest, Kovic re-politicizes his life by using hunger as a radical counternarrative to the state's necropolitics by redelivering life and death into his hands and dismantling traditional understandings of vulnerability and power. By embracing his disabled physical reality as a platform for public activism, Kovic defies societal expectations and redefines his political existence. The analysis has also demonstrated that the hunger strike proves to be the most impactful form of political engagement for Kovic. Although the hunger strike does not have lasting political effects on Kovic, it allows him a fleeting opportunity to transform himself from an object of the military's failings into a subject of valiant acts before he inevitably succumbs once more to the clutches of the government.

Hurricane Street is a narrative that offers a complex layer of understating the political capabilities of the human body as a vessel for resistance, particularly through the act of a hunger strike. The significance of hunger strikes in reclaiming political rights cannot be underestimated. Hunger strikes have a long history as a powerful form of nonviolent protest, often utilized by individuals or groups who feel marginalized or oppressed by the political system. However, the implications of hunger strikes among disabled veterans are serious. The difficulties faced by disabled soldiers in undertaking a hunger strike are multifaceted and deeply rooted in their physical, logistical, and emotional circumstances. Undertaking a hunger strike necessitates a level of self-sufficiency that may be challenging for them, especially when their disabilities require specialized medical equipment and constant assistance. The absence of proper nutrition during a hunger strike can further weaken their already compromised physical state, making it even more difficult to manage their care and maintain their overall health. Also, physical barriers, such as stairs, uneven terrain, or lack of accessible facilities, can impede their ability to actively participate in public demonstrations, occupy spaces, and stage protests. All this adds a layer of emotional strain, potentially exacerbating pre-existing mental health issues and affecting their overall well-being. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that the voices of disabled soldiers are not silenced, and their rights and grievances are not overlooked. Providing disabled veterans with the necessary support system—be it emotional, medical, or physical—is essential to accommodate their unique circumstances and create inclusive platforms for their activism.

While this paper explores the experience and motivation of one disabled veteran engaged in a hunger strike, it fails to explore the hunger strike as a social movement that strategically organizes itself to draw attention to pressing issues of the veteran disabled community. The absence of a comprehensive analysis limits the generalizability of the findings and hinders the ability to draw broader conclusions or establish patterns within this movement. As the disabled veteran community continues to seek social change and improved conditions, it is crucial to conduct more comprehensive research on hunger strikes. Future research should seek to address these limitations and provide more experiences of disabled veterans on hunger strikes across diverse cultural, political, and socioeconomic contexts in the like of Pascal Lacoste in Canada or Gurkha veterans in London to identify commonalities and differences. Only through understanding hunger strikes in this broader context can it be possible to appreciate their potential and limitations as a powerful tool for social and political transformation.

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