Refugee camps are carefully governed spaces, marked by the humanitarian imperative to help what is conceived as the helpless victims of war. In this managed, secluded and bureaucratic space politics is perceived by the humanitarian agencies in charge as divisive and destructive of the social fabric of the refugee community which is considered volatile in the first place. In this paper I argue that despite these attempts to stamp out politics, camp life is highly politicised. If one goes beyond the surface of apparent order and homogenised space, one finds a place that is teeming with conflict, power hierarchies and violence, as refugees seek to recreate political subjectivities. Politics creates divisions and ruptures but it also creates order and meaning for the refugees as they attempt to come to terms with life in the bureaucratic non-place that relief agencies have created for them.

I argue that due to its clandestine nature, political opinion is expressed mainly through rumour mongering and closely linked to criminal activities and violence. In the following I explore how violent events in the camp are interpreted through rumours that differentiate the camp into hierarchically ordered spaces; hot spots and cool places, places of mobility and action and places of docility and stagnation, safe havens and dangerous territory, areas for friends and for enemies. In this way, the camp is recaptured and begins to be a place that can be interpreted and understood. This is a highly politicised process.

The setting is Lukole Refugee Camp in Northwestern Tanzania where roughly 100,000 Burundian Hutu refugees had lived for up to five years at the time of my fieldwork (1997–98). UNHCR was in charge of running the camp, assisted by ‘implementing partner’ NGOs. In many ways, Lukole is a prime example of state-of-the art humanitarian relief work. Not only did the relief agencies supply the
refugees with food, clean water and health facilities against all logistical odds. They also were keen on implementing the latest policies that had been hatched in Geneva, Brussels and Oxford; sustainability, refugee participation, women’s empowerment and community development. As I have argued elsewhere (Turner 2001), such attempts at empowering the refugee community may be understood as biopolitical ways of governing the camp. The governmental techniques of UNHCR are similar to other modern biopolitical regimes, usually associated with the liberal welfare state, as has been so aptly explored by the Foucauldian governmentality school (Cruikshank 1999; Dean 1999; Foucault 1978; Hindess 2001). This mode of governing through self-government is also an anti-politics machine, not only in the sense proposed by Ferguson (Ferguson 1990), relying on technical solutions such as efficient health care, head counts, water and sanitation planning and so forth. It also relies on strengthening ‘the community’ without politicising it. In this paper I show how such attempts at empowering the community while voiding it of political subjectivity fail as refugees repoliticise the camp in diverse, clandestine ways.

The death of a wealthy refugee

On March 26th 1998 I attended a meeting with street leaders, NGOs and UNHCR in Lukole A, in which the issue of security was being taken up by UNHCR’s protection officer. He was telling them that important people; leaders; ‘some of you sitting here’ were hosting Burundians from Burundi who were not officially registered in the camp. ‘Please tell these people to go to Mbuba4 to be scanned and registered. Some of these people that you are hosting have been caught for making an illegal training facility, abduction and torture’. He was clearly hinting at political activities in the camp and at the rumour that camps in Tanzania were being used as bases for the rebels in Burundi. But he also linked it to a general deterioration of security in the camp.

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2 Jennifer Hyndman (2000) has some very illustrative accounts of such systems in the refugee camps in northern Kenya.
3 The camp is administratively split in Lukole A and B. As we shall see, these two sections have very different histories and therefore also different politics.
4 Registration site for new arrivals.