

Introduction

Detention and deportation practices in the UK have drawn critical attention from academic and activist circles in the wake of the expanding immigration detention regime of the 2000s. Detention centres are scrutinised as a sites of state violence and carceral control of migrant bodies (Gibney, 2008; Bosworth, 2014; Coutin, 2014). The Nationality and Borders Bill (2022) is the latest iteration of this turn towards detention as a means of governing flows of migration and migrant bodies, opening the door for an escalation in the use of immigration detention in the UK and advancing the logic of the 'Hostile Environment' (Home Office, 2021a). Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) in the UK hold people who are subject to immigration control in custody before they are released back into the community, or deported or removed from the country. It is an administrative process, not a criminal procedure, and therefore people in detention face no judge, no court, and no time limit on their stay. Yarl's Wood IRC is one of 7 IRCs currently in the UK and can be considered distinct in that it has predominantly detained women. The centre has been the subject of considerable political and media attention through high-profile reports of mistreatment, abuse and protest in immigration detention have emerged from Yarl's Wood IRC and much of the campaigning around immigration detention in the UK has thus centred on the women there.

Using Yarl's Wood IRC as a case study, this article will conceptualise IRCs as a microcosm through which to theorise the control and dehumanisation of migrant bodies within the contemporary context of the 'Hostile Environment', particularly the bodies of migrant women. Given their highly securitised nature, access to detention centres in the UK are difficult to obtain for researchers doing empirical work in this field. This is even more limited by focusing on the few sites where women are detained (Bhatia and Canning, 2020). This article offers an alternative to this empirical constraint, analysing a rich sample of secondary sources that have focused on the site since it opened in 2001, including (ex)detainee testimonies, Home Office policy guidance and documents, reports and campaign materials from NGOs, news articles and undercover investigations. The objective here is not to consider Yarl's Wood IRC as an exception but rather as an example of the ongoing gendered and racialised violence of bordering, made visible through these clearly defined centres of intensified carceral control.

The detention centre acts as both an overt instrument of state-sanctioned violence and a space where detainees and their treatment at the hands of the Home Office are hidden from public view. The ways in which people experience this exclusion and isolation is both racialised and gendered. This article advances these accounts of state power in the context of migration control and the detention estate and draws attention to not only to the ways in which these processes are racialised but also how they are gendered. In doing so, it turns a critical gaze towards the ways in which these experiences have been narrated and argues that it is a process which erases and masculinises women who are detained, centring the male experience and complicating narratives of vulnerability.

Theorising the detention centre

Though the detention of people subject to immigration control in the UK was first legitimised in law by the 1920 Aliens Act, the routine 'administrative' detention of non-citizens did not become so widespread and normalised until the 1990s (Hall, 2010). Since then, the expansion of the detention estate has been felt more keenly in what Nicholas de Genova terms the 'spectacle' of enforcement, imposing stricter and more forceful border measures in response to the perceived 'problem' of immigration (2002, p. 437). As Alison Mountz suggests, nation-states are advancing

“their own politics of location by imposing immobility on others” (2011, p. 394). Migrant bodies are thus rejected and removed from the body politic to a detention centre.

Immigration detention resembles criminal incarceration as part of the wider nexus of illegality and ‘cimmigration’ – where crime and immigration controls intersect to impose unique, or uniquely harsh, punitive measures against non-citizens. One notable exception is the point of release; although some detainees may be released or given immigration bail, others will be deported to unsafe or unfamiliar nations. This constant threat of removal is represented by the change in name from Detention Centres to Immigration Removal Centres, shifting focus to the desired expulsion and obscuring the potential of release - despite the reality that most people who are detained are released back into the community (Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002). In recognising the parallels between immigration and carceral detention, it is useful to revisit the origins of intersectional thought. Drawing on a rich tradition of black feminist thinking, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1991 article mapping the social underpinnings of intersectionality demonstrates the significance of interlocking racialised and gendered identities within legal and justice systems. I argue that immigration status is a further axis along which state power is enacted.

Through an intersectional lens we can begin to understand the ways in which for women in detention, their experience is both racialised and gendered (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2015); their identity as women, as migrants, and as people of colour mutually constitute the social divisions they are subject to, “forming the particular nuanced and contested meanings of particular social locations in particular historical moments, within particular social, economic and political contexts” (Yuval-Davis, 2015, p. 94). As Bosworth et. al attest, “traditional gendered and racial ideologies uphold and legitimate the spaces created by the hyper-politics of border control” (2018, p. 2192). Thus far, the literature has demonstrated the ways that women’s bodies are considered racially and sexually dangerous as they approach national borders (Brennan, 2004; Scambler, 2007; Bosworth, Fili and Pickering, 2018). Less consideration has been given to spaces of hyper-bordering and bodily management within the nation state, namely the detention system, where women are doubly dominated – through detention and through gendering. Though there have been a few notable exceptions to this point in recent years, including Vicky Canning’s work on the gendered harm of the British asylum and detention systems (2017; 2019) and Maria De Angelis’ empirical research on women’s experiences of life in an IRC (2019), this remains an often-neglected area of migration research.

“Parcels, not people”: the dehumanising power of administrative detention

Michel Foucault’s work is useful in developing a critical genealogy of the penal system, describing a shift in public punishment to private supervision and interiorising deviant bodies and behaviour until they can be reformed and released (1979). He theorises the body as an instrument or intermediary and so claims that “if one intervenes upon it to imprison it [...] it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property [...] punishment has become an economy of suspended rights” (ibid. p.11). This biopolitical state of suspension is critically relevant to detainees who exist in liminality; they are reconstituted as migrants who are unable to migrate and so are characterised both through their mobility and their imposed immobility.

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owens, reveals how this incongruity of identity as (im)mobile bodies is articulated through the detention system in a report in 2005 following inspections of UK removal centres. She claimed that those in detention “had been dealt with by the immigration authorities as though they were parcels, not people; and parcels whose contents and

destination were sometimes incorrect” (2005, p. 5). The identity of the detainee as a person is eroded as they are dehumanised by the system, compartmentalised into ‘contents’ and ‘destination’. This is reinforced by implications of the term ‘administrative detention’, as if detainees are paperwork to be filed away rather than imprisoned people or that the detention itself is a mere bureaucratic formality. In real terms, administrative detention is enforced confinement of people by the state without trial, distinct from criminal justice procedures. As such, the borders of the nation-state are drawn and managed through practices of administrative and narrative differentiation.

This representation of detainees as inanimate, defined by their ‘incorrect’ movements is echoed by Alexandra Hall’s research on staff-detainee relations in a British IRC (2010). Hall notes the problematic relationship between the physical body of a detainee and their administrative identity which may match up in complicated ways, if at all. Through frequent recorded errors made by immigration authorities or through alleged deception by the detainee, staff are often confronted with identities that they consider to be in conflict and are unable to resolve this to recognise the person as a whole: “The officers feel that the only thing they know about the detainee, for sure, is the body in front of them. A man’s origins, biography and history are unknown.” (2010, p.889). This is unique to the immigration detention experience as Foucault details how inmates of the criminal system would typically be accompanied by a full record of previous ‘deviant’ behaviour and life history that is often not available to immigration authorities (1979). Detention is therefore a productive process, constructing identities of people as unknown and therefore unsafe at the same time as it seeks to contain and ‘administrate’ them. As such, one function of the IRC is to translate detainees from unknown, deviant bodies into known, manageable ones through monitoring, or what Hall terms ‘somatic alertness’ (2010).

An inability to read identity through the body generates anxiety around the unknowability of the migrant, an anxiety that is replicated in binary imaginings of the unknowability of the Other. It is also worth noting that for Hall, while other important aspects of an identity are reduced, the masculine identity is upheld; it is “a *man’s* origins” that are unknown (2010, p.889, emphasis added). While the male detainee may be biographically unknown through conflicting identities, the female detainee is unknowable in a different way – through the absence of any identity at all. Returning to Foucault’s writings on power, punishment and biopolitics here, their gender-neutrality are notable despite his objective to elucidate the ways in which power is invested in the body and so fails to address the significance of gender in these processes (1979). Foucault argues that system of discipline produces docile bodies through regulation, however as Sandra Lee Bartky asks “Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?” (Foucault, 1979; Bartky, 1988, p. 27). Extending this critique, we can begin to consider the position of migrant women who are to be disciplined across a range of axes due to their specific social location. For Foucault, they are ‘docile bodies’ as detainees and for Bartky, they are ‘docile bodies’ as women; they are also, however, bodies who must be made ‘docile’ as migrants through processes of racialisation, coloniality and nationalism. Migrant women are constructed as deviant through their behaviour, transgressing national borders, but also for the deviant nature of their identities as women.

This erasure of migrant women in detention is reflected in much of the academic literature within a UK context, even that which claims to offer gendered perspectives. There is a stark disparity between the invisibility of detained women in academic literature compared to the hypervisibility of women in anti-immigration campaigning. While discussions, debates, and activism about immigration detention often centre women, however, in statistical terms this group makes up a small proportion of the detention population. Using the latest figures published by the Home Office,

we can see that in the last three years less than 4% of people in immigration detention were women (Fig 1.). Over the last decade no more than 11% of the population of the immigration detention estate were women (Home Office, 2022). Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo demonstrate the disproportionate impact of immigration controls on men from the Global South, a process they call “gendered racialized removal” informed by imaginaries of racialised masculinity (2013; see also Abji and Larios, 2020). This has significant implications for the representation of migrant detainees, as much of the academic literature discusses the general detainee population which consists mainly of men.

The experiences of men are thus treated as the norm, despite evidence that women experience detention differently and are also typically held in separate facilities to men. Therein lies an uncomfortable, gendered nexus between a feminized vulnerability which sustain anti-detention narratives and the somatic masculinity of the detention estate. It is critical to recognise not only the weight of these experiences as they are told, but also how they are told and by whom. Through unconsciously centring men as the representative migrant detainee, the detention experience itself is masculinised and detained women are erased from the narrative. It is important to challenge and destabilise these processes in academic research through a meaningful commitment to intersectional work.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: People in detention under immigration powers in the UK, year ending December 2021 to March 2023 (Home Office, 2022)

Alt text: A table illustrating the number of people in detention under immigration powers in the UK, year ending December 2021 to March 2023 (Home Office, 2022).

Who deserves to be detained? The gendered conditionality of security

As Imogen Tyler argues, the process of social abjection works precisely through the repeated “constitution of the figure of the asylum-seeker as a threat”, however there is a certain unease around detaining women and children that is not upheld for migrant men, whose migration or asylum claims are often dismissed as ‘illegal’, ‘undeserving’ or ‘bogus’ (Tyler, 2006, p. 191; Griffiths, 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Goździak, 2021). Men are perceived as the emblematic threatening asylum-seeker, posing a specifically masculine threat of job-theft, deception and potential violence. Indeed, Bosworth and Slade suggest that men in immigration detention may resist and reassert their remaining visible identity through hypermasculine displays of dominance in response to poor treatment and status insecurity (2014).

In their 2019 study on news representations of refugees and asylum-seekers, Lindsay Blumell and Glenda Cooper demonstrate that men were identified eight times more than women - mostly in connection to crime, terrorism, and violence (2019). In comparison, women were usually connected to health and social issues (ibid.). Annabelle Wilmott corroborates these findings, adding that 88.24% of photographs of female refugees from online newspapers contained children, compared to only 40.68% for male photographs. This representation closely associates women with a mothering role and conflating women and children as one passive, vulnerable group (2017). Harriet Gray and Anja Franck understand these racialised representations of masculinised threat and feminised vulnerability as mutually dependent, woven into the scaffolding of colonial modernity; refugees and asylum-seekers are therefore understood through popular media as a risk or as at risk, a distinction drawn along gendered lines (2019). By decentring women’s voices in this way, the media are complicit in perpetuating this stereotype of the hypermasculine migrant – a figure that

must be met with hypervigilance on the part of the state. Playing into these insecurities legitimises the role of the detention estate and further invisibilises the migrant women within that population.

Although narratives of vulnerability may be strategically operationalised by some individuals and groups, Kate Smith and Louise Waite illustrate how "the dominant narrative of 'the vulnerable' is ultimately detrimental and damaging to those being identified and categorised as vulnerable" (2019, p.2295). This narrative is dependent on a moralised understanding of 'deservingness' or 'undeservingness' that reduces migrants to one-dimensional characterisations and through which belonging is intrinsically conditional. This critique can be further enriched by considering the gendered character of these narratives, as vulnerability is intrinsically feminised. Sara Farris explains that through identifying migrant men as violent and migrant women as victims of violence, this "binary of oppressor and victim [...] feeds on representations and stereotypes that were deployed during colonial times [...] and that are part and parcel of more general racist repertoires" (2017, p. 5). She conceptualises this as part of the framework of 'femonationalism', analysing how Muslim and non-Western migrant women and their rights are used and co-opted by different groups to further their own political and economic interests. As such, migrant women are culturally constructed as individuals in need of special attention, and even 'rescue', operating as an ideological tool that is strictly connected to their perceived oppression at the hands of migrant men rather than patriarchal and nationalist forces at work within the host nation. Despite the prevalence of masculinised depictions of detainees, and migrants more widely, much campaigning and advocacy around immigration detention draws on ideologies of femonationalism to centre on women and children as victims (Gower, 2014; Women for Refugee Women, 2018). This is not to take away from these masculinised narratives, instead it works to reinforce them as women and their children are imagined as exceptional and therefore 'deserving' of release compared to the uncontrollable flow of men who 'deserve' to be detained.

Though there have been some gains made by these campaigns, such as the legal ending of child detention and restrictions on detention for pregnant women, there are limits to how far such a framing destabilises the system of immigration detention. When non-state actors evoke narratives of vulnerability to inspire compassion for specific groups or individuals - in this case, migrant women - this ultimately serves to reproduce the mechanisms of the state in drawing distinctions between people who deserve freedom and protection and those who do not. This approach sits within the emergence of a cultural and political framing of humanitarianism (see Fassin, 2005; Ticktin, 2014) and a claim to 'compassion' invoked by not only "those who resist punitive immigration policies, but also by those who seek to enforce these policies" (Sirriyeh, 2018, p.2). In a speech by then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in 2010, he makes clear that such reforms are in no way a threat to the detention estate – they merely bolster the "integrity" of the immigration system in redressing it as more palatable:

"Our reforms will deliver an approach to families that is compassionate and humane, while still maintaining the integrity of our immigration system. [...] Reforms that will give the UK one of the most child-friendly immigration systems in the developed world."

(2010, emphasis added)

In silencing critics through ostensibly giving way to 'reasonable' demands, the UK Government legitimises the economically and politically productive process of detention rather than making way for abolition of the system. It positions such demands as 'unreasonable' while at the same time reaffirming its own power to define and frame what it means to be 'reasonable', 'compassionate' and 'humane' to suit its own interests. It is also important to note that while these

campaign successes are often framed as gains for migrant women, women who are not mothers are ignored by these policy changes. These women are therefore considered exempt on the grounds of their motherhood rather than their womanhood, reinscribing heteropatriarchal ideals of who 'deserves' punishment or protection. This resonates with Abji and Larios' work on the intersections of reproductive and migrant justices (2020). They contend that state discourses of vulnerability are framed as biological rather than structural and so reinforce gendered and racialised narratives of men from the Global South as a threat to public good.

There is a mismatch between these ideological claims, even those written in law, and real-world practice. Pregnant women are a category who are ordinarily only considered suitable for detention in very exceptional circumstances according to Home Office regulations, as they can only be held for 72 hours, or up to one week with the approval of a minister (2016). Nevertheless, a commissioned assessment into the progress of these welfare changes found that pregnant women were still being detained "unnecessarily" (Shaw, 2018, p. 28). In realistic terms, therefore, pregnant women are subject to immigration detention despite a critical and systemic lack of gynaecological and obstetric medical care across a detention system which assumes its population to be biologically male. Through claiming that pregnant women are not detained, the detention estate is not obliged to provide adequate care and so this violence is at once legitimated and concealed. This is not only a disregard for the well-being of detained migrant women and a risk to their health, but also evidence of the harm that can be enacted by considering the general detainee population without taking an intersectional approach. Though there is an emerging field of research on gender and immigration detention (see Bosworth and Slade, 2014; Esposito et al. 2019; De Angelis, 2020), little attention has been directed towards the detention centre as a site of reproductive justice. Salina Abji and Lindsay Larios' 2020 study offers a rare exception to this, recognising reproductive justice as it intersects with migrant justice and abolitionist futures and highlighting the productive potential of intersectional work.

One difficulty that must be acknowledged is that women may not initially be aware of their pregnancy when entering detention and so are not protected by these restrictions. Moreover, even when they are aware they may not be believed due to the culture of disbelief that is embedded in the detention estate, framing migrant women as deceptive in order to receive special treatment, release, or support for their asylum claim (Gibson, 2013). In one example, a pregnant woman with a history of diabetes and high blood pressure was detained at Yarl's Wood IRC but the nurses refused to believe she was pregnant or allow her to test her blood sugar until she brought them the visual evidence of a miscarriage in a bucket (Medical Justice, 2007, p. 15). This figuring of the deceptive woman is compounded by detained women's perceived links to criminality. Although their detention is administrative rather than criminal, these women are still symbolically and semantically entwined with imaginings of illegality as 'illegal immigrants'. It is clear that in some cases detainees' identity as a migrant overrides their identity as a mother, despite their own narratives. In this way, any protection afforded to migrant women through gendered means ultimately fails and is unable to disrupt powerful racialised, colonial and nationalist constructions of migrant womanhood.

'Caged animals': The intersections of race and gender for detained migrant women

Migrant women in the UK who are working in the sex industry are particularly targeted by the detention estate, despite policies designed to protect those who are forced into sex work through trafficking (Lousley and Cope, 2019). In one reported example, a woman who was forced into sexual slavery was released from detention only to be returned to the address where she was previously exploited rather than referred to specialist support services which could provide safe housing, as is the Home Office's obligation (Bulman, 2019). Drawing on Maria Lugones' work on the

coloniality of gender, Francesca Esposito et. al explain how colonial hierarchies are “(re)elaborated” in Portuguese detention centres through the gendered opposition of civilisation/savagery for Brazilian women - particularly those working in the sex industry (2019, p. 10). Detention therefore cultivates not only the rejection of migrant women but also their diminishment and degradation through operationalising tropes of othering. Similarly, Mary Bosworth et. al demonstrate how a perceived willingness to engage in sex work is seen by detention staff as fitting with the cultural othering of women in Greek detention centres (2018, p. 2191). Women in UK detention centres are also subject to the living history of colonial hierarchies in particularly gendered and sexualised ways, or what Lugones terms the ‘coloniality of gender’ (2016). The dehumanisation of migrant detainees speaks to the colonial histories that are irrevocably linked to the UK’s immigration system.

A former detainee at Yarl’s Wood IRC has spoken out about racist abuse, claiming that staff referred to her and other inmates as “black monkey” (Taylor, 2010). Undercover investigations at Yarl’s Wood IRC also exposed examples of staff referring to detainees as “beasties” and “bitches” (Channel 4 News, 2015). One scene from Channel 4’s undercover investigation of Yarl’s Wood IRC shows the male detention staff standing against the backdrop of a wall of CCTV displays which monitor the women in all areas of detention centre, disparaging the detained women: “They’re all animals. They’re caged animals” (Channel 4 News, 2015). Fanon recognises this dehumanisation as a mechanism of colonial racism:

[...] it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. [...] When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary

(1961, p. 41)

Using animal terms to refer to detained migrants is therefore engaging in dialogue with the racism which structures the detention system and informs its actors. This depiction of detained women as animals must be considered in light of the wealth of literature illustrating the representation of women of colour - and Black women in particular - as being too dominating, animalistic, and less fully human (Plous and Neptune, 1997; Collard and Dempsey, 2018). Dehumanisation through claims to perceived animality is not only a racialised encounter but also one that can be analysed from a gendered perspective. Metaphorising women as animals has historically been a means of devaluing and dehumanising them, constructing ideological justification for their alleged inferiority (Adans and Donovan, 1995; Rudman and Mescher, 2012); Elizabeth Grosz traces the historical configuration of the female body as connected to animality and nature and how feminist scholars have contested this as an objective, biological truth (1994). Categorised as “bitches” and “caged animals” by the staff at Yarl’s Wood IRC, the detained women are figured as inappropriately dominating bodies which must be contained through the detention system.

(Re)producing vulnerability through the detention estate

One important aspect of immigration detention that works to control and regulate detainees is the process of heightened supervision and surveillance. Although typically translated into English as Discipline and Punish, it is worth noting that the original work was titled *Surveiller et punir*. The French title’s emphasis on surveillance is truer to Foucault’s theorisation of the mechanisms of power and speaks more keenly to the experiences of migrant detainees (1979). Recent studies have shown the embodied effects of surveillance on people in immigration detention (Briskman, 2013; Radziwinowiczówna, 2020). Moreover, many people who have been released from detention are

still subject to the heightened surveillance of the detention regime, imposed through means such as curfews and electronic tagging (Klein and Williams, 2012; Bhatia, 2021).

Within the detention centre itself, heightened surveillance and supervision of women's bodies is a part of everyday life. In a report released by *Women for Refugee Women*, the majority of women detained at Yarl's Wood IRC who were surveyed claimed to have been watched by men in intimate situations such as while naked or partly dressed, in the shower, changing sanitary towels or on the toilet (Girma, M. et al. 2015, p. 11). One anonymous detainee shared that "Men enter your room without knocking and see you in bed every day", while another added

It is embarrassing asking a man for sanitary towels, and then he comes into the bathroom afterwards when you are changing it. Why? All women in Yarl's Wood are harassed by men coming into their rooms.

(Girma, M. et al. 2015., pp.11-12)

It is evident from the experiences that these women have shared that this heightened surveillance is a means of control that intersects with gender in oppressive ways. The persistent lack of privacy and male intrusion into women's beds and restrooms is a contributing factor to deteriorating mental and physical health for some detainees. For women from traditional communities or survivors of sexual violence it can be particularly distressing: "I have a history of sexual abuse. This man can do anything to me. [...] It makes you so vulnerable." (Girma et al., 2015, pp. 11–12). Women in detention are denied their agency and privacy, regarded as bodies that must be contained and monitored but that can also be trespassed upon without consequence.

Previous studies have shown that over 70% of migrant women in detention have experienced rape or other sexual violence prior to their detention (Girma et al., 2015); for those seeking asylum, this sexual violence is often a key component of their case. Almost a quarter of these encounters were enacted by soldiers, police, prison guards, or other state actors (ibid., p.4). It is apparent that in these cases, rape cannot be viewed as only a personal tragedy but instead must be considered a mechanism of institutionalised oppression. To then re-imprison these women and subject them to the hyper-surveillance of similar state actors is a risk to their mental health and reproduces their vulnerabilities through a replication of the same kind of institutionalised oppression they have already been subject to.

There have also been numerous reports of sexual impropriety, harassment, and assault between staff at Yarl's Wood IRC and detainees (Lampard and Marsden, 2016). Women report being coerced into sexual acts or exchanging them for special favours or promises, such as a better chance of staying in the country. In response to one allegation the UK Border Agency's professional standards unit, which has responsibility for investigating allegations of misconduct, said the alleged victim did not indicate to its investigator that her sexual contact with guards was "anything other than consensual" (Townsend, 2013). Consent, however, relies on conditions of transparency and equality that are not possible between staff and detainees. Academic studies and legal cases involving incarcerated women in the criminal justice system find that true consent is not possible between inmate and staff due to the irrevocable power imbalance, even without evidence of physical coercion or explicit manipulation (Smith, 2001; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson and Anderson, 2003). The UK Border Agency not only represent detained women as capable of consent, they are complicit in reproducing a narrative of racialised hypersexuality in depicting the women as literally 'asking for it' (Shimizu, 2007; Partridge, 2012; Frazier, 2020).

In response to these oppressive processes, women in Yarl's Wood IRC have shown resistance through embodied forms of protest. One woman dissented by covering her body in oil to be too slippery for officers to handle, rendering her body inaccessible and resisting regulation or trespass by immigration authorities (Vincett, 2018). The women have also organised collective actions, such as naked protests. On 10th and 11th April 2008, a group of African detainees protested in solidarity with a mother and her British-born child who the state was attempting to deport. Several of the mothers removed their clothing, some expose their breasts and others stripping to bare their genitalia (Tyler, 2013).

In a telephone conversation with an anti-deportation activist, one of the protesters, Mercy Guobadia, said: "I took my clothes off because they treat us like animals. We are claiming asylum, we're not animals" (Guobadia, in Dugan, 2008). Guobadia is drawing a direct connection between this embodied form of protest and the violence of the detention estate, as exemplified earlier by Yarl's Wood guards referring to inmates as "monkey" and "bitch" (Taylor, 2010; Channel 4 News, 2015). This naked protest must be considered within the context of the biopolitical environment where the bodies of migrant mothers and pregnant women have been reconstituted as targets objects of heightened regulation, surveillance, and domination. In redirecting and reclaiming the scrutiny towards their non-White, feminine naked bodies these women mimicked the nation-state's violent reduction of their bodies and "refused their designation as disposable populations" (Tyler, 2013, p.244).

There is rich literature on the embodied protest of hunger strikes organised by detained and incarcerated people, drawing on Foucault's work on biopolitics and Mbembe's development of this theory as necropolitics (Foucault, 1979; McGregor, 2011; Pfeifer, 2018; Mbembe, 2019). Drawing on these concepts, Anderson argues that

self-starvation conceptually and methodologically obtains significance as cultural practice not simply in gesturing towards absence, but in viscerally and affectively summoning us to bear witness to the low, slow wasting away of human flesh

(2010, p. 2)

In this way, hunger striking re-signifies the disposable body that has been relegated to the margins and hidden from public view in IRCs and temporarily disrupts the detainees' political invisibility. A statement given by the detainees articulates this following one such hunger strike, claiming that "even though the hunger strike is now over, we are still hungry for our freedom and justice" (Detained Voices, 2018). The women in Yarl's Wood IRC thus make reflexive connections between the systemic violence of the immigration system and self-violence to their own bodies.

Less attention has been given to gendered implications of these protests. When considering hunger striking among migrant women, it is important to also consider the cultural, social, and political significance of the food that is being refused. As De Angelis suggests, "When lives are ruled by external immigration forces, some choices over what to eat, when to eat it, and who with, afford women a rare moment of asylum agency" (2020, p. 214). Arguably, the choice of what and when *not* to eat is also an embodiment of this agency. Preparation and sharing of food in detention spaces can also be resistance; De Angelis documents how sharing cultural foods and recipes can reaffirm a gendered identity, support other detainees through difficulties, and build an identity as a homemaker in a space defined by deportability (2020). Cooking and sharing traditional foods can be a form of cultural transmission, narrative memory and identity affirmation for migrant women

(Minkoff-Zern and Carney, 2015; Bailey, 2017). Within the detention centre, this takes on even greater political meaning as it becomes an act of everyday resistance.

Conclusion

This article has argued that revisiting accounts of life in an IRC through Government and NGO documents, individual testimonies, and media investigations, reveals how migrant women are subject to domination through the gendered and racialised apparatus of the detention estate. Migrant women's bodies have become sites of management and control, as well as reclamation and political agency. This article also critiques how these narratives centre men as the representative migrant detainee, and so the detention estate itself is masculinised and detained women are erased from the narrative. It also highlights the disparity of the erasure of women from empirical research compared to hypervisibility of women in campaigning. The work of linking the mutually constitutive processes of racialisation, colonisation, nationalism and gendering, and the ways in which these processes intersect to shape the lives of detained migrants, has never been more critical.

The urgency of this work is evident when considering recent developments in migration governance within the UK. The Nationality and Borders Bill threatens to intensify an already violent and restrictive border regime, expanding the detention estate and increasingly detaining migrant women through new terrains of detention and biopolitical governance. A new immigration detention unit specifically for women has since opened and discussions about the introduction of offshore detention centres are gaining traction in UK politics (Home Office, 2021b). This new centre, Derwentside IRC, has already faced significant criticism from campaigning groups including an unsuccessful legal challenge on the basis of the lack of in-person legal advice (Tanoh, 2022). Most recently, the damning reports emerging from Manston processing centre reiterates the state-sanctioned violence of the detention estate (Bancroft, 2022). It is therefore crucial to represent the voices of these women in the growing body of literature on border politics and the detention system, laying the groundwork for a rich area of future research that uncovers the oppressive processes at work within the current immigration system as well as the embodied forms of protest that migrant women use to resist this.

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