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Bodies in Protest:

Understanding self-harm in immigration detention

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Abstract

Self-harm in immigration detention is more than just a symptom of mental ill-health. This thesis argues that it should instead be seen as a form of communication – an act of resistance and protest by detainees in the face of the human rights violations of incarceration.

Currently, most research into self-harm in immigration detention focuses on the causal links between incarceration and high rates of self-harm. It does not seek to understand why people in immigration harm themselves, nor what these actions mean. This thesis argues that self-harm should be examined within the context of systemic violence and alongside a structural analysis of power, resistance, vulnerability and agency.

Data from interviews and research are examined within the prism of a theory of violence and sovereign power. This unique approach requires incorporating multiple disciplines including psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, political science and queer theory.

Relying heavily on the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this thesis concludes that even in situations of total power such as immigration detention, people are not passive acceptors of injustice. They retain the ability to act. In settings where official and conventional avenues of communication have been cut off, their resistance

takes on non-conventional forms and the body is a last resort of action. Detainees' bodies are literal sites where sovereign power is not only played out, but also opposed.

This research seeks to provide a more nuanced and structural understanding of self-harm. It also challenges the complicit reinforcement of dominant power structures which flow from traditional readings of self-harm. This approach ultimately allows the rehumanisation of immigration detainees and their actions.

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