

Book Review: Visiting Immigration Detention, Care and Cruelty in Australia's Asylum Seeker Prisons by Michelle Peterie
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Michelle Peterie (2022) *Visiting Immigration Detention, Care and Cruelty in Australia's Asylum Seeker Prisons* Bristol: Bristol University Press, 176 pp (ISBN 978-1-5292-2661-4) £27.99 Pbk

Visiting Immigration Detention, Care and Cruelty in Australia's Asylum Seeker Prisons is a harrowing exploration of the tragic impact of immigration detention upon those who are both detained within such an inhumane system, but also of those who enter these carceral spaces as visitors. Drawing on research conducted between 2015 and 2020, interviews with over 70 regular visitors to Australia's onshore immigration detention facilities document the harm and cruelty that is enacted through this opaque system. In this book, Peterie substantially adds to the existing literature by skillfully interrogating the dehumanizing system of immigration detention. The author offers a compelling alternative to those that frame harmful detention policies as unintended failures. Crucially, rather than accidental consequences, 'the reverberating harms detention imposes are not *failures* of this system but rather evidence of its essentially malign *function*. Cruelty is the point' (p. 2).

In the opening chapters, Peterie locates the immigration detention system within the political, historical and theoretical context, which is crucial to understand the evolution of Australia's asylum seeker policies. The author argues that although Australia joins other countries such as the US, UK and the majority of Europe in its uncompromising approach to deterrence and detention policies, it still remains 'the only country in the world with a policy of indefinite mandatory detention' (p. 10), attracting widespread criticism from international human rights organizations. Specifically, attention is drawn to the flagship policy at the time of conducting the research, 'Operation Sovereign Borders' (p. 20), established in 2013 by the Liberal-National Coalition government following a controversial campaign of border protection policies. The human cost of this policy is tragic, as Peterie illustrates with distressing accounts of 'sexual abuse, self-harm and suspicious deaths' (p. 21), often involving children within both offshore and onshore detention facilities.

The strength of this book is articulated within the five empirical chapters, where the core aspects of research explore bureaucratic violence (Chapter 3), pains of imprisonment (Chapter 4), care and resistance (Chapter 5), forced relocations (Chapter 6) and reverberating harms (Chapter 7). In particular, chapter 4, 'Witnessing the Pains of Imprisonment' (pp. 55- 77), offers a compelling account of bearing witness to 'institutionally manufactured pain' (p. 77) that shows how asylum seekers are subject to deprivations and uncertainties that significantly generate and reproduce trauma and harm. Participants in the study starkly describe the brutal impact upon those detained as they highlight the pain associated with lack of autonomy, agency and a 'denial of life necessities' (p. 75). In one distressing visitor testimony, the agony of family separation is evident as a detained child is distraught when her father (living in the community) has to leave the detention facility:

'That evening when it was time for us to leave the little girl couldn't stop crying "cause she just wanted to leave with her daddy". And she would huddle under his jacket and just didn't let go. The Serco guard had to take her by force and remove her. [...] All that little girl wanted was her daddy.' (p. 60)

Similarly, in chapter 6, 'Forced Relocations' (pp. 96-112), the disruption and disorientation of the relocation process is illustrated, whereby those detained are transferred to other detention facilities unexpectedly, with no notice. Peterie warns that by focusing on the notion of confinement in relation to detention facilities, 'it is easy to overlook the use of forced *movement* as an instrument of carceral power' (p. 98). Within the testimonies, the cold and deadly impact of Kafkaesque 'disappearances' (p. 99) in the visitors accounts is apparent:

'They said, "she's been moved", and I said, "oh, where to?" and they said, "oh, we don't know where she's been moved to. Or when it happened. Or nothing. We just know she's been moved". So I thought, she could have been deported.' (p. 100)

Throughout this book, there is no escaping the grim realities of immigration detention. The research powerfully displays how intentionality and cruelty are entrenched in an inhumane system that 'allows profit to be derived from the

racialized, marginalized, criminalized and ultimately commodified bodies of people of colour' (p. 31). I am also acutely aware as I write this review that the UK Government's 'Illegal Migration Bill', now dubbed the 'Refugee Ban Bill', is proceeding through parliament, removing the right to seek asylum and criminalizing those seeking protection. I highly recommend this book for all those eager to understand how the chilling escalation of '*intentional harms*' (p. 136) are purposefully and deliberately embedded into the dangerously exploitative 'immigration industrial complex' (Golash-Boza, 2009).

References

Golash-Boza, T. (2009) 'The immigration industrial complex: Why we enforce immigration policies destined to fail', *Sociology Compass*, 3 (2): 295-309.

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