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Under pressure: moods, affects and the violence of everyday life in a Spanish migrant detention centre

Gerhild Perl 

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Trier University, Trier, Germany

ABSTRACT

What does it mean when the future of one's life is exposed to the inscrutable will of an intangible other? And what are the possibilities of still asserting oneself when pushed to the limit? Nuancing the feelings of different actors in a detention centre and analysing how everyday moods, affects and violence intertwine, I explore how the randomly cruel and often-inexplicable logic of the contemporary deportation regime pushes migrants to their limits. Taking as my starting point the argument that deportation practices are effective because they operate on an affective level, I show how affective experiences manifest themselves bodily and how violent practices and discourses reverberate in bodies. I argue that 'bodies under pressure' are testimonies of racialised histories of exclusion, and I show how they become calls for social recognition. Exploring small, often-unintended acts of rebellion against exhausting deportation practices, I stress the existential necessity and social importance of including oneself in the realm of meaning.

KEYWORDS

Deportation; gender; meaning; migration; racialisation

Introduction

The police guards enter the prison dining hall and call out three female names. 'You will be released within a couple of hours', one of them says, 'Go, get your stuff.'

'Are we free?' a woman asks.

'Yes.'

The women start screaming with joy. Laughing, they fall into each other's arms. Some of the detained women hug them, others remain in their chairs, watching them with mixed feelings. Somewhat embarrassed by the cheerful mood, the guards around stand awkwardly. The three released women have been detained for several weeks. They all come from Cameroon and arrived in Spain together in a rubber dinghy. Dorothy, also from Cameroon and on the same boat as these women, asks the guards, 'And I? Am I free too?'

We are all looking, first at Dorothy then at the guards.

'Only the three are free', one of them responds.

'I am not?'

'You are not.'

CONTACT Gerhild Perl  perl@uni-trier.de,  @PerlGerhild

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Dorothy gasps. Her body stiffens and the silence in the room makes time stand still. I don't move an inch. Nobody moves. Except for Dorothy. Her mouth twitches and her gaze slides into a void. For a moment, it seems as if Dorothy is returning to us. She tries to contain her body, but it slips away. Her body tenses and a high-pitched scream cuts through the room. She starts trembling, so strongly it is as if invisible hands are shaking her. Her limbs weaken and she falls to the ground. A few women rush to her side, the guards step back. The three women, who have just cheered with joy, watch Dorothy anxiously from afar. Dorothy lies motionless on the floor. I lose sight of her as more and more women stand around her, shielding her with their own bodies. We others – the guards, the volunteers, the anthropologist – stare at them wide-eyed. Exposed and yet powerful, Dorothy's body made us painfully aware of what 'our' laws do and how 'our' practices harm. No one was innocent. Not in this moment.

When Dorothy regains consciousness, she stands up, walks towards the guards and looks them straight in the eye. 'Why?' she asks, 'Why am I not free?'. The guards stare at her dumbstruck and Dorothy explains in a calm, slightly shaky voice, 'I come from the same country as the others. We have arrived here together, in the same boat. Why must I stay in prison?'

This devastating incident occurred in a *centro de internamiento de extranjeros* (CIE), a migrant detention centre located in a southern Spanish town, which all its detainees called 'the prison'.¹ Between 2014 and 2016, I conducted fieldwork on irregularised migration across the Strait of Gibraltar and volunteered in the prison as a Spanish teacher. During the more than thirty visits I made to the CIE, I was often deeply disturbed by the opaque logic of the deportation procedures and the enormous emotional pressure the detainees had to endure. Everyday life in the prison was charged with affect: the women were devastated, bored, angry and depressed, sometimes joyful and optimistic and at other times falling apart; the feelings of the volunteers and guards oscillated between empathy and indifference, and benevolence and control, blurring the lines between compassion and repression (see also Fischer 2015; Kalir 2019).

In this article, I thus conceptualise the prison as a 'moody place' saturated with affect, and I ponder what it means when the future of one's life is exposed to the opaque workings of the state. How do people deal with a situation in which powerful affects, such as the fear of removal, shape everyday life? How do they not panic in a panic-producing dynamic? And what are the possibilities of their still asserting themselves when pushed to the limit?

There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. Therefore, I address them by using ethnographic fragments on the moods and affects of everyday life in the CIE. I seek to understand how the often-unfathomable logic of violence of the contemporary deportation regime reaches into the most intimate of thinking and feeling, thereby binding people together or driving them apart.

Deportation, affect and the prison as a moody place

The removal of undocumented migrants has become 'one of the most emotionally contentious state practices of our times' (Strasser and Sökefeld 2025) and, accordingly, anxieties, fears and hopes are central themes in deportation studies (Coutin 2015; Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015; Hall 2010). Moreover, to better understand the intimate layers of the violence inflicted upon deportable people and to analyse both the continuum of (in)voluntary return (Strasser and Sökefeld 2025; see also Barone 2025; Hjalmarson 2025) and the effects of contemporary 'bordering practices', anthropologists have

provided important insights into the destabilising qualities of ‘forced waiting’ (Khosravi 2020), the emotional burden of temporal uncertainties and chronic instability (Griffiths 2014) and the embodied experiences of deportation (Peutz 2006). In line with the theme of this Special Issue, I contribute to this literature by exploring the complex role of affects and moods in both the struggle for social recognition and the tenuous relationships formed between people inhabiting different subject and power positions.

Unlike scholars who rightly argue that deportation is a ‘process that begins long before, and carries on long after’, expulsion (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015, 551) and who, accordingly, offer gripping accounts of the trajectories and lived experiences of deportable and deported individuals (e.g. Mahar 2025; Peutz 2006; Tecca 2025), in this article I zoom in on one decisive moment in the long process of removal: the stay in the detention centre. Taking as my starting point selected moments of everyday life in prison, I describe the role of affects and moods in fragile encounters. Drawing on my fieldnotes and diaries, and on conversations and memories of my visits to the prison, I try to creatively re-enact (cf. Sen 2023) the prison’s affective composition and to show the emotional pressure the detained migrants are exposed to when their future is determined by arbitrariness. This ethnographic, micro-analytical and experience-based approach focuses on fleeting instants, fragile relationships, and the rather unspoken, latent and subtle moments in fieldwork encounters. My aim is to provide a nuanced description and analysis of what it means to be held in a detention centre when the fear of deportation looms, ‘creating the utmost uncertainty and insecurity’ (Sökefeld 2020, 14).

Many of the women I met in the CIE were constantly under a certain kind of pressure that was sometimes released in such moments as the one I described in the opening vignette. Exhausting deportation policies, practices and materialities made the detainees angry, depressed or anxious, and also pushed them to their limits. Yet, registers of feelings in moody places are not only consequences and expressions of oppression and injustice but have an effect in their own right. They have the potential to make an impression on others and to provoke shifts in perceiving, understanding and feeling, thereby creating new relationships.

Affects and moods are slippery notions with multiple meanings and thus easily escape conceptual grasp. ‘Affect’ in particular has been the subject of vast theorising over the past twenty years and, although there exists no ‘single, generalizable theory of affect’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 3) and the scholarship on it lacks ‘conceptual clarity’ (Schipers 2015, 93), prominent representatives of affect theory agree that social life cannot be captured by cognitive processes alone (Perl 2019). Affect has thus become a concept used to integrate non-representable and trans-personal forces, energies, intensities, moods and atmospheres into theories of the social and to make room for the messy dynamics that constitute social life (e.g. Clough 2007; Massumi 1995; Thrift 2008).

Although inspired by the affective turn, I take a twofold critical stance. First, the strict separation between internal subjectivities (emotions, knowledge, meaning-making) and external affects transmitted through bodies, matter and space, disavows the discursive, symbolic and imaginative dimensions of affect and runs the risk of establishing the affective and cognitive realms as irreconcilable opposites (Ahmed 2014; Brennan 2004; Navaro 2012; Perl 2019). Building on postcolonial and queer-feminist scholarship, I thus stress that cognition and affect cannot be clearly separated; rather, the gap between the bodily-affective and the cognitive-reflective can open up only because the

two different experiences of oneself are contiguous (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 210). Second, a universalist tendency inherent in affect studies favours affect's 'positive' potentiality and neglects both how power relations work on our affects (Ahmed [2004] 2014; Butler 2009; Navaro 2017; Tolia-Kelly 2006) and how they become effective because they operate on diversified affective levels. Moods, atmospheres and affects are not authentic, a-historical, universal forces detached from cultural, social and political norms, as prominent proponents of affect studies tend to argue. Rather, how bodies are racialised and gendered in a particular setting profoundly influences the ways in which these bodies are affected and how they affect (Tolia-Kelly 2006, 5). This is especially important for the ethnographic exploration of how people experience everyday life in a detention centre, how they relate to one another, and how they resist in the context of structural violence. An ethnographic account thus needs to be attentive to the fact that 'the affective capacities of any body are signified unequally within social spaces of being and feeling' (Tolia-Kelly 2006, 3). Such an approach to affective life resists discourses that feminise and racialise certain affective responses and emotional expressions, while still being aware of differences caused by power formations (Greyser 2012). In this article, I thus explore affective registers and moods 'in the context of multiple power geometries that shape our social space' (Tolia-Kelly 2006, 5).

While affects are conceptualised as floating, circulating and transitory, moods are often described in terms of inertia and pervasiveness (Ahmed 2014; Felski and Fraiman 2012). Moods can colour a whole room and take over an entire social fabric. They hang around and cannot be willed away: '[m]ood is everywhere, all the time, always' (Highmore 2013, 435). Affects and moods, however, are closely intertwined. A mood can intensify a certain feeling; and a word, thing or action 'can appear differently depending on the mood we are in' (Ahmed 2014, 14). A mood is atmospheric and, like an affect, influences how we experience the world around us. When we are in a mood, 'we are caught up in feelings that are not our own' (Ahmed 2014, 15), yet our affective states can change inert collective moods. Moods are therefore not the mere sum of different affective states and, although individual feelings and behaviour can influence the mood in a room, the atmosphere can also change the individual mood (Breidenbach and Docherty 2019). This attests to the social quality of moods and further points to the fact that moods are inert as well as changeable (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017). Moreover, and as I show in more detail below, affective work aimed at 'feeling better', in conjunction with external, unknown and surprising circumstances, might sometimes shift the mood in prison.

In this article, therefore, I approach the prison as a 'moody place'. I do this because, on the one hand, heightened or subdued affects characterised everyday life in the CIE and, on the other hand, because a certain mood always shaped the encounters between the detainees, the guards and the volunteers. Conceptualising the prison as a moody place further allows me to 'diversify affect' (Navaro 2017) and pay attention to changing moods related to the different conditions and ramifications of affective states embedded in specific power relations.

In what follows, I first provide the social and legal context of the Spanish migrant detention centre where I conducted fieldwork, focusing on the harmful racialisation and homogenisation of the detained women. I then revisit Dorothy's struggle with the arbitrary decision to keep her imprisoned and I analyse how the opaque workings of

the state create affective states of fear, bewilderment and disassociation. By presenting the affective work that was done with the aim of ‘feeling better’, I thirdly explore the tenuous relationships between detainees and volunteers, and the unpredictable power of moods. I conclude by arguing that a body can rebel in a moment of enormous pressure and that its unintended affective force can powerfully reclaim the social space of meaning.

The prison

Migrant detention centres are essential pillars in upholding contemporary border policies. While (criminal) prisoners are subjected to criminal law, migrant detainees are subjected to an administrative apparatus that places them ‘effectively outside the purview of the law’ (De Genova 2020, 164). Non-citizens are thus ‘penalised simply for being who and what they are’ rather than for what they have done, which indexes their legal, social and cultural dis-belonging and results in the dispossession of a political voice (De Genova 2020, 161). In addition, Spain’s migrant detention procedures isolate migrants from wider society, making them disappear from the public space and gaze (White 2019, 396). However, and as anthropologists have shown, deportable people struggle for political and legal recognition in public spaces (Peutz 2006) and, as I discuss below, powerfully claim their very existence in these total institutions.

In Spain, ‘centres for the internment of foreigners’ (*centros de internamiento de extranjeros*, or CIEs) have existed since 1985 (Barone 2015, 326). According to the 1985 Aliens Act, more precisely the ‘Bill on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain’, ‘the foreigner may be detained as a preventive or precautionary measure while the case is being processed’ (Boletín Oficial del Estado 1985, my translation). Although this law further states that CIEs do not have a penitentiary character (Jarrín Morán, Rodríguez García, and de Lucas 2012, 210), several of Spain’s eight CIEs are located in former prisons or military facilities (White 2019, 395).

The CIE where I conducted fieldwork had been the town’s prison for more than forty years. It was built in 1959 and was shut down in 2000 due to its run-down state, and poor sanitary facilities. In 2004, it was reopened to detain migrants, mainly women from a variety of African countries who arrived in Spanish territory irregularly by boat. Most of the women I met there came from West African countries but some were from Tanzania, South Sudan and Malawi. Others came from Latin America, Romania, Russia and Iran, and were either visa over-stayers or had been transferred from a regular prison to the CIE with a deportation order. North African men, mainly Moroccans, were also detained there, awaiting deportation, but I rarely saw them. They were not allowed to attend the Spanish classes and were strictly separated from the women. Occasionally, we heard rumours about them, especially when they had attempted to escape.

A variety of affects are built into the place through its prison architecture. Barred security doors with padlocks, surveillance cameras, fixed tables and chairs, holding cells, and the bright, glaring light shape the mood, determine every movement and affect how people connect with one another. In this setting, emotions become entangled with the physical surroundings, blurring the lines between individual experiences and external atmospheres (Brennan 2004). The detainees, the guards, the volunteers and the anthropologist all absorbed the energies that emanate from the prison’s oppressive

design, which confined us, albeit in very different ways. Yet, most importantly, the prison was, for all of us, a place where no one wanted to be.

The detainees were thrown into a burdensome period of waiting, which was moulded by opaque procedures and a temporary community. They complained about the shabby infrastructure, the humidity and the dirt, and the guards often did too. Several guards told me how much they disliked their job and how they wished they could be assigned elsewhere. In the prison's entrance area, a yellowed newspaper clipping denouncing the poor conditions, which are well known to the Spanish authorities, was displayed. Alongside the guards' restrained complaints, human rights organisations are frequently critical of unsanitary conditions and report repeated scabies incidents.

While the detainees and guards had to be in the CIE, albeit for different reasons, the volunteers chose to be there. However, some of them stayed for only a very short time, eager to leave as quickly as possible but with the satisfaction of having done something meaningful. And there were many days when I had to force myself to visit. I was hardly ever in the mood to go to the prison.

I gained access to the detention centre through a parish where I conducted fieldwork. The parish ran a shelter for undocumented male migrants and homeless men, and its activists consisted of a priest, four nuns and a few Christian volunteers, all in their late sixties or seventies. To them, the Bible, and especially the word of Jesus, was the basis for initiating social transformation in their neighbourhoods by siding with those they considered most disempowered, such as homeless people, regular prisoners, sex workers and undocumented migrants. None of them wore a habit or vestments and were thus not recognisable as church representatives. In their daily activities, Christian compassion and political solidarity were closely intertwined and I observed a strong tendency to victimise the CIE detainees.

Thanks to Pilar, one of the nuns, I was able to access the prison, yet as a volunteer Spanish teacher not a researcher. We visited weekly, and normally stayed between two and three hours. I also often went alone, outside the context of the Spanish classes. None of the volunteers was a trained teacher nor did we have any basic knowledge of literacy education. In the classes, we tried teaching the women phrases with which to manage everyday life in prison and to communicate their needs and health issues to doctors and the guards.

The volunteering had also a more explicit political dimension. The guards repeatedly refused us entry with flimsy reasons, such as not enough staff present, still at breakfast, women exchanging summer clothes for winter clothes, or claiming no one knew we were coming. Once, they did not let us in for an entire month. But the volunteers did not let up; we went anyway, waited for hours and doggedly negotiated with the police. The more visible political struggle against the CIE did not take place inside the prison; the nuns, the priest and the parish volunteers played an important role in co-organising frequent, yet poorly attended, demonstrations outside. Whenever a protest happened, we informed the detainees about it, and they usually responded with a gesture of indifference. After all, these protests would not change their situation.

Life in prison contrasted starkly with the detainees' life en route. Many of them had lived for several years in Morocco, with no legal protection and exposed to extreme gendered and racialised violence (Perl 2020). In Spain, though, they were engulfed by an administrative apparatus that governed every aspect of their lives, restricted their

mobility and controlled their bodies. Being suddenly thrust into such a regulated environment, imbued with disciplinary procedures, surprised, not to say shocked, many of them. ‘Spain’, Dorothy once said, ‘in Morocco everyone was talking about Spain. What the hell, Spain?! I’m in prison now!’ And Nadine, a Cameroonian I also met in the CIE, told me after her release how ‘thrilled’ she and her husband had been when they arrived in Spain. ‘Finally, we had reached our destination’, she said. ‘But then they [the Spanish border guards] treated us badly. I didn’t do anything wrong and they locked me up’. Her husband, who was detained in a different centre, added, ‘The prison was an entrance exam (*examen de passage*) to Europe. It made me realise that the country I had been dreaming of did not exist. It is just a different kind of suffering, maybe a better one’.

On reaching Spanish territory, West Africans use the word ‘Boza’,² meaning ‘victory’, as a kind of rallying cry in their metaphorical war against restrictive border policies. After years of precarious, poorly paid work and begging, to save up the money for the illegalised passage, the long-awaited arrival on European territory is charged with positive affects, more so if there have been previous unsuccessful crossing attempts. However, this joyful sense of victory clouds over quickly, and many realise that their fight has not yet ended. Rather, the violent reality of structural inequality is chronic and stretches across borders. Although migrants are well aware of the restrictive EU migration policies and the threat of deportation, during my fieldwork I encountered the strong belief among them that they themselves would not be deported. And how could they think otherwise? Imagining such a thing is dangerous, and the new arrivals I met in prison could not accommodate such an outcome. After everything they had been through and sacrificed, how could they be sent back? It made no sense.

Everyday life in prison

Faith from Burkina Faso pulls up her T-shirt, shows us her scars and says that she can’t go back.

Young Joyce from Cameroon is angry because we still haven’t started our Spanish lesson.

‘Which phrases do you want to know?’

‘How do you say, “Shut up”?’

Dorothy suggests that everyone raise their hand before answering a question. ‘Everyone needs time to think.’

The elderly Nigerian woman rebukes me and tells me how to do a better job as a teacher.

Françoise wants to pay me for my service. I changed 10,300 Moroccan dirhams into euros for her.

Osa’s ears ache.

Joyce gives me a letter she wrote for me: ‘But you can’t read it until later!’

I tell them that I’m not a real teacher, but an anthropologist doing a study on the border.

Nadine says that she had already suspected this and that she would be an interesting case for my research.

The old, male Spanish volunteer calls out to us, “That’s it!”, when we are silent for a moment.

The silence.

The noise.

The Russian woman is planning to contact Greenpeace to assist her in finding her chihuahua.

The mother from Iran doesn’t know where her ten-year-old daughter is. Is she still in Spain?

Nadine says that she would never stay in Spain, where even white people beg on the streets.

Joyce scribbles a multitude of words she caught from the TV on a piece of paper, which I translate one by one.

I repeatedly attempt to convince her to talk to a lawyer from the human rights organisation and her curt response: 'No. It's my choice'.³

For some women, the Spanish classes provided a space where they could share their anxieties, frustrations and anger. I saw some of them for several weeks and our relationships continued to develop beyond the period of their imprisonment, whereas I met others only once or twice. Yet, although most of the relationships between the women and me were volatile, sometimes a certain closeness was possible. This intimacy did not emerge as a result of trust built up over a long stretch of time; rather, the heightened affective intensity and the shared outrage about the conditions brought us together. Moreover, the other volunteers and I were important allies in negotiating better treatment, communicating health problems and bringing in much-needed items. These small acts of solidarity brought us closer (on long-term relationships between migrants and volunteers see Strijbosch 2025).

The women differed greatly in terms of their social experiences and how they dealt with detention but they all summarised everyday prison life as an 'eat and sleep' routine. They lived together in small, shabby rooms with bunk beds, with no possibility of being alone, and conflicts among themselves and with the guards were common. Some of them were eager to learn Spanish and to occupy their mind with a foreign language and thus welcomed the classes as a distraction from everyday prison life; others, however, disengaged completely. To them, learning Spanish was pointless since they planned to go to France, Belgium or Germany, where family members were already living. Some of those who had entered Spain by boat via Morocco considered the prison the last threshold they had to cross before entering Europe and starting a new, stable life. Others were pushed to their limits, and a few expressed the desire 'to go home', which was also a desire to regain some control over their fate.

'Those from the *paterna*' in particular, meaning those who had come to Spain irregularly by boat, were homogenised in harmful ways. The guards, doctors and also some volunteers referred to them as 'the immigrants' (*las inmigrantes*), 'the girls' (*las niñas*), 'the poor things' (*pobrecitas*) and, especially, 'the annoying ones' (*las pesadas*), those who asked for too much and impeded the smooth everyday running of the centre.

The detainees lacked the most basic items, such as sanitary pads, body and face cream and underwear, but what they complained about most was the poor medical treatment. Many of them were well aware of the status that human rights have in Europe and they insisted on their dignity as human beings. After all, they were finally in Europe and that had to count for something. Many did not accept their situation passively, but actively tried to modify it by negotiating better medical care and demanding basic personal hygiene items. Their arguments for better treatment, however, were repeatedly dismissed. There was an unspoken agreement among the guards that the women were annoying. This 'social agreement' (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 211) meant that the women were arrested twice, both restrained by the prison walls and imprisoned by the racialised and feminised attributions attached to them. This harmful racialisation mirrors the racist and sexist discourse on the 'uncontrollable Black female body'. By portraying the women as 'annoying', 'ill-tempered', 'illogical' and even 'aggressive', the guards invoked the 'myth of the angry Black woman' and stereotyped them in injurious ways (Ashley

2013). Furthermore, such labelling completely erases historical conditions, political injustice and psychological stress. Neither the women themselves nor the reasons for their frustration were taken seriously, their feelings dismissed as irrelevant. Disparaging homogenisations and essentialisations allowed the guards to affectively move away from the women and construct them as an unruly collective Other that needed to be governed (Ahmed 2003, 121). This harmful fixing of especially the migrating ‘African body’ reflects the Western ‘long-standing fear of “unordered” and “chaotic” African space’ (Dunn 2004, 483).

Everyday life in prison was, thus, shaped not only by great uncertainties regarding the detainees’ future but also by harmful affective and moral judgments. Although some of the guards were occasionally disturbed by the opaqueness of the deportation orders they had to play a part in, they barely showed compassion. Instead, they justified their (in)actions by stressing that they ‘just follow the rules’ (see Strasser and Sökefeld 2025). Consequently, and as I show in the next section, the women were left alone to deal with the inexplicable logic of seemingly arbitrary deportation verdicts.

Arbitrariness and the opaque workings of the state

‘Why me?’ asked Dorothy a few days after receiving the grim news depicted in the article’s opening scene. ‘I didn’t do anything wrong’, she said shaking her head, ‘I can’t go back, you must understand, I can’t’. I grabbed Dorothy by the hand. Her thoughts kept going round in circles. Over and over again, she tried to understand the judge’s opaque decision not to release her with the others. Although no deportation order had yet been issued, Dorothy was convinced that she would be removed from Spain. But what was the logic behind this decision? And how could she possibly comprehend it?

Understood as a mode of production within the affective economy of detention, ‘arbitrariness’ is a useful concept to convey the experience of something apparently capricious happening to someone, beyond reason or rule. The fear of deportation, the unfathomable reasons why one person is deported and another is not, and the severe lack of communication on the part of the authorities cause emotional unrest and incessant brooding. The arbitrariness experienced by Dorothy cannot be reduced to a subjective feeling but instead mirrors the entrenched opacity of Spanish migrant detention procedures, which is also ‘evidenced by the absence of public data on detention operations and weak parliamentary oversight’ (White 2019, 396). In Spain, detained migrants are released, transferred to another CIE or deported in a system that fundamentally lacks transparency (Jarrín Morán, Rodríguez García, and de Lucas 2012; Solanes Corella 2016; White 2019). Migrants can literally disappear from one day to the next without anyone knowing their whereabouts, and it was thus difficult, and usually impossible, to keep track of the women (on the intersection of disappearances and bureaucracy and the resulting methodological challenges see Huttunen and Perl 2023).

A brief pause and there it was again, this haunting question: ‘Why me?’ At first, the others listened to Dorothy empathetically, but the more she asked the question, the more impatient, almost irritated, both the detainees and the guards became. Her stubborn questioning and implicit critiquing of the arbitrary decision and thus of the opaque workings of the state was a form of political protest (cf. Sen 2023). Dorothy

experienced this profound lack of transparency and, initially, repeatedly confronted us with the cruelty of the deportation regime.

Dorothy's future and past were both stolen. The journey, the years spent in Morocco learning the language and cultural norms, and the sacrifices made to save up the money for the crossing ended up being 'thwarted by deportation' (Khosravi 2018, 40). Her uncertain future disturbed the other women and amplified the fear of deportation. While the police, the volunteers and I myself got a limited sense of what fearing deportation feels like, the other detained women became infected by this very fear. Cameroonian women in particular were profoundly shaken. For months, a rumour had been circulating in the prison that Cameroon's president would not accept deportees from Spain or would demand 7,000 euros per person. This rumour enabled Cameroonian citizens to expel the fear of deportation from their affective registers. It lulled them into a sense of security that was dashed when Dorothy was not released with the other women. Their fragile sense of security dissolved and was overtaken by another possible reality: suddenly everyone was deportable. In violent settings where access to knowledge is restricted, rumours are specific types of information, even social facts, that respond to the incomprehensibility produced by the arbitrary violence of the deportation regime (Pian 2017).

Why her? I don't know. Dorothy was, in her early forties, significantly older than the three released women. It is not clear to me on what grounds she applied for asylum. She told me that she had escaped domestic violence and poverty. Since she was neither a minor nor a war refugee she was possibly not considered vulnerable enough for asylum to be granted. Female victims of human trafficking have increased chances of being saved from deportation but I learned from my conversations with Dorothy and others that claiming asylum on such grounds troubled them, and more than a few refused to do so. Some did not consider themselves trafficking victims and, for others, talking about sexualised violence was too intimate an option.

Not being released changed Dorothy. Up to this point, we had talked a lot. She told me about her life and family in Cameroon, the everyday struggles in Morocco, and her hopes for the future. 'I want to live a calm life', she used to say, as so many other women do, 'a life without violence'. Yet, the more certain she became that she would be deported, the more she withdrew into herself. Dorothy no longer participated in the Spanish classes and answered my questions in monosyllables. One day, she was suddenly gone.

Dorothy's story is not an isolated incident. The possibility of suddenly disappearing shaped everyday life in prison and weighed on the mood. In the next section, I discuss how this mood influenced my encounters with the detainees and how the volunteers actively tried to counteract it.

Affective work aimed at 'feeling better' in a moody place

Moods have a power in their own right and profoundly influence how we relate to one another. In the prison, the mood always remained unpredictable and no one could know in advance in which mood they would be trapped. Even though moods do not belong to a subject and are atmospheric intensities, they are deeply social. They produce different intensities of feelings for different people with different affective capacities, subject positions and social, legal and political standings in the world (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 11;

Tolia-Kelly 2006, 5). Being in a shared mood and being bound together by it does not erase the profound inequalities that shape human encounters. Although we – volunteers, detainees and guards – were all permanently affected by the prison's mood, we were affected differently and with different intensities.

Improving the mood in the prison was one of the volunteers' main goals. 'We need to do something for their mental health', is what Pilar, who is also a trained psychologist, often said when we got together as volunteers to brainstorm ideas for our visits. Songs and games were the most common attempts to lift the women's spirits and connect with them. Sometimes these activities brought us closer together, sometimes they had no impact at all, and at other times they drove us apart. I was never quite sure whose desire the funny games and cheerful songs were meant to satisfy. The volunteers sought to brighten up the place, 'move' the women out of their burdensome daily routine and create 'good feelings'. The aim of 'easing time', as Pilar would say, was an attempt to have a positive impact on dull prison life and to show solidarity with the detainees, at least temporarily. These efforts to make the women 'feel better' rarely worked though, and even felt ludicrous at times. However, even if this affective work did no more than make the situation more tolerable for the volunteers, it should not be dismissed as completely pointless. The volunteers sought to implicate themselves in the lives of the detainees. The activities were an attempt to momentarily escape the prison walls, and the visits in general were aimed at showing the women that the injustice inflicted upon them did not go unnoticed or unchallenged.

One day we were lucky and the guards ignored us. Something more important was happening. Maybe the rumour that the detained Moroccan men had made a new escape attempt was true. The guards did not restrict our time inside or search our bags and, after a brief negotiation, they allowed me to bring in my mobile phone if I promised not to take any photographs. The prison's landline had not worked for several weeks and the detainees were not allowed to use their own mobile phones to make calls.

It was a sunny day after weeks of cold, wet weather. Spring was in the air. The women I had known for weeks were still there. We went into the courtyard and they called their families, partners and friends in the Gambia, Cameroon, South Sudan, the Netherlands, Spain, France and Morocco. Since some of the women had commented on my nails the week before, I had brought some polish with me in an attempt to have some fun together. We sat in small groups, painting our fingernails, joking and laughing. It was a joyful afternoon. Only Osa sat alone, in a corner. I had seen Osa a few times, but had never talked to her. She hardly spoke to anyone. She seemed depressed and was fading away before our eyes. Her ears were bothering her and she was having trouble hearing. I asked if she wanted me to paint her nails, and nodding in agreement she chose a bright red colour. When we had finished, Nadine, who had taken charge of my phone, ensuring that everyone was able to make calls of a reasonable length, handed the phone to Osa, who moved away from us to talk to her mother in peace. After a while, she came back and shakily pressed the phone into my hands. Weeping, she fell to her knees and showered us with gratitude.

The injustice of being imprisoned in a foreign country, the unpredictability of the procedures, the exhausting journey, the being away from home, and the uncertain future all take a tremendous toll on the human psyche. Osa was on the edge, and in such a state the

tinest kind gesture can mean so much. The sunny day, the laughter, hearing her mother's voice and the brief lightness in the air, all these things together released a tension that allowed her to let go. For a moment, she could give in. A moment without struggling, a moment when the whole world is not against you. While Dorothy's collapse, which I described in the opening vignette, meant that she was thrown into a nowhere, I believe that Osa's breakdown was more a fall to somewhere and someone. That day's good mood not only allowed her to let herself fall, it also caught her.

Although the collective mood did not often enable good feelings to emerge, the detained women were not always sad, angry and bored; rather, hope and fear resided in them, side by side. Despite their significant limitations, attempts to 'feel better' are important, especially if one's future is hanging in the balance and the senseless time leaves too much room for worrisome thoughts. Affective work aimed at 'feeling better' does not mean that justice has been done, and neither should it become the goal of political action, but 'feeling better does still matter, as it is about learning to live with the injuries that threaten to make life impossible' (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 201). Hence, feeling better in times of extreme hardship is necessary so as to make life possible. Such affective work does not disguise inequality and injustice; rather, it allows good feelings to coexist alongside bad ones. We knew that we could not change the injustice the women had to endure but this work gave meaning to our encounters. Although the good moments were fragile, they still enabled a temporary turning away from the weight of reality. Although I frequently questioned what going to the prison meant, I am convinced that such visits are meaningful, not because they have an impact on anyone's migration status or on political change, but because through them the ongoing injustice is jointly recognised and claimed, and because they express solidarity in the form of concern about the life of others (Eckert 2020).

Bodies under pressure and the agentic dimension of affects

I conclude this article by taking a closer look at Dorothy's and Osa's breakdowns and by asking: to what extent might a body rebel and powerfully claim the social space of meaning in a moment of enormous pressure? Inspired by Spinoza's often-cited statement that '[n]o one has yet determined what the body can do' ([1677] 1996, 71), I am interested in exploring how affects manifest in bodies and how bodies pushed to their limits respond to violence. I thereby seek not to reinforce a body and mind, or affect and cognition, dualism but, rather, the opposite. In a phenomenological vein, I conceptualise the body not merely as something we *have*, but as something we *are*. My understanding of the body rests on the lived and felt dimension of subjectivation processes. How we perceive the world and how we relate to one another is a deeply bodily experience and there is no state of feeling 'without bodily sensations, bodily resonance, and affectability' (Fuchs 2013, 222). Feelings manifest themselves in our facial expressions and gestures, our voice and gaze. At the same time, however, bodily-affective responses do not lie outside the realm of discourse, meaning and signification. They are not universal forces that are liberated from social and political norms (Butler 2009). Although the body might react impulsively, an individual body is not self-contained but is always embedded in and even constituted by a web of relationships. The body is always-

already situated in its surrounding world. This social embeddedness, however, can also take the form of radical separation.

When Dorothy broke down after receiving the devastating news, her body took on a powerful presence and, although she captivated us completely, she seemed far away. None of our words or gestures could reach her in that moment, and yet, the dissemination of affects bound us together. While Dorothy's collapse was triggered by an unbearable weight that made her hope for a viable future disappear, Osa's outburst of gratitude was more like an exhalation after a weight had been lifted. A collapse is always an uncontrollable event during which something internal breaks out. It is an outward movement that engulfs those around it, loudly, visibly, imposingly. But as much as something broke out of Dorothy and Osa, something took hold of them and broke into them. Hence, a collapse is not simply an 'inside going out' or an outside going in; rather, it is an accumulation of affective potencies (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 227). It is a movement that travels into, out of, through, between and about bodies. Both women's bodies mediated the violence they had to endure and created complex relationships with those around them. They could no longer contain the tension, and the constant pressure they were under had to be released. As such, bodies under pressure are testimonies of racialised histories of exclusion, and violent practices and discourses reverberate in them. They not only become 'calls for recognition' regarding the injustice inflicted upon them but also immediate 'forms of recognition, in and of themselves' (Ahmed [2004] 2014, 200)

Dorothy's and Osa's breakdowns did not receive the same attention. While Dorothy's collapse significantly changed the mood in the room and moved us all in some way, Osa's tears, while not unnoticed, did not captivate anyone except Nadine and me. The other women in the courtyard paused only briefly, watched Osa in passing, and then went back to their business.

Nevertheless, both situations speak to an agentic dimension that is inherent to bodies under pressure as they powerfully claim their very existence. Many of the deportable migrants I met in prison were pushed to their limits. However, they were not mere victims of the violence they embodied; rather, they forcefully challenged power relations by affecting the social fabric of the prison 'through their physicality' (Nouvet 2014, 86). As such, affect is a bodily capacity; it permeates our bodies and also the world and those around us. To understand this agentic dimension of affects, Elisabeth Grosz's concept of 'competing micro-agencies' is helpful (2005, 5; see also Nouvet 2014, 93). According to the feminist philosopher, micro-agencies are not grounded in negotiations between autonomous subjects or social groups but, rather, express an excess of multiple and untrammelled forces within a subject and beyond the subject's ability of control. It is not intentional action and deliberate choice but unknown, surprising and overwhelming forces that make the body act (see also Siegl 2023).

In particular, Dorothy's response to the possible deportation verdict made an impression upon those around her. Her affectedness affected us, albeit in different ways. While we all witnessed the cruelty of contemporary migration practices, the volunteers and I, and perhaps even the guards, were made aware of our own mostly uncontested *raison d'être* in this world; the other detainees, however, were confronted with a possible version of their own future.

Moreover, Dorothy's and Osa's collapses provide 'evidence of historical processes' (Berlant 2011, 15). The affective moment is not simply a floating situation; rather, the

excess of affective micro-agencies communicates ‘the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment’ (Berlant 2011). Thus, the immediacy of their bodily-affective responses is mediated by specific histories and communicates a historical time (Berlant 2011; see also Ahmed [2004] 2014, 212). In other words, although the women’s collapses lasted for only a brief moment, they constitute powerful situations that unambiguously demonstrate the effects of the contemporary ‘removal fetishism’ (Strasser and Sökefeld 2025).

Dorothy’s collapse was an instantaneous revolt against a devastating verdict. In a highly restrictive setting that curtails the impact of one’s actions and constantly threatens one’s future, the bodily-affective response becomes the last resort to say ‘no’. Thus, the intrusive body makes sure that this ‘no’ is heard and powerfully involves others in one’s own reality. Dorothy drew a boundary by mediating the violence inflicted upon her and, here, saying ‘no’ means saying ‘yes’ to oneself. Dorothy broke with the social norm and disrupted the prison routine by claiming her very being. Her breakdown was the ultimate way to articulate the very meaning of her life (Oliver 2004, xi). Not only the collapse, but also her stubborn question, ‘Why me?’, was a small, yet powerful, rebellion against social, legal and political exclusion, by including herself in the social realm of meaning. Both her breakdown and her quest to understand the opaque workings of the state are radical questionings of our world and a relentless assertion of her own singularity as a dignified human being. This was not a strategic political project, and it had no impact on her migration status, but it was a call to be socially recognised and acknowledged. Through her breakdown, Dorothy expressed the simple yet powerful words: ‘I exist’. Her body further said, ‘There is only so much I can take’. Through her body, she made her very existence have meaning.

To understand the affective effectivity of current deportation policies and practices, in this article I nuanced the feelings in a migrant detention centre. By exploring how affects and moods constitute one another, I analysed how the randomly cruel, and often-arbitrary, logics of the contemporary deportation regime push migrants to their limits. I showed that bodily-affective responses to the brutality of the contemporary deportation regime are both a symptom of and a revolt against oppression. Affects, therefore, play a central role in both the existential necessity to include oneself in the realm of meaning and the often-unsuccessful struggle for social recognition.

Notes

1. In Spain, migrants can be detained for up to sixty days for identification purposes, until a judge decides on their migration status and possible deportation.
2. The word stems from Cameroonian slang; its etymology is unclear (Bachelet 2019, 48).
3. Snippets from my fieldnotes, 2014–2016.

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ORCID

Gerhild Perl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2596-7771>

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