Afterword

The Urban and the Carceral

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Afterword

The Urban and the Carceral

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Abstract

In this afterword, I consider some of the important insights that are generated in this special issue. The thorough and detailed consideration of the ways in which detainees and formerly incarcerated persons survive confinement and the constraints imposed on them illustrates the power of ethnography. Each of the contributions builds on strong empirical material and sometimes decade-long engagement with people in and on the brink of confining institutions. In this way, the contributions form a comprehensive empirical foundation for understanding confinement beyond the carceral institutions, while also allowing us to ask new kinds of questions about confinement beyond site. While firmly rooted in prison ethnography, the special issue thus inspires urban studies and anthropologists more broadly to think concertedly about the role of confinement, not only as the fate of many urban residents but as an ever-present element of the urban imaginary and of urban life.

Keywords: confinement, detention, ethnography, prison, site, urban, urban anthropology

What is the relationship between prison and, for instance, urban slums or ghettos? What does the prison wall signify and do to people living on either or both sides? Is the prison *like* the ghetto in terms of how both confine? Is the prison an extension of other confining spaces – part of the same system of oppression? Over the past decades these and other questions have begun to emerge and to challenge the scholarly silos between, for instance, prison and urban studies. Famously, Angela Davis (1998) analysed what she called the 'prison-industrial complex'. At the same time, Loïc Wacquant (2001) spoke of 'striking similarities and intriguing parallels' between prisons and ghettos and identified what he called a 'deadly symbiosis' between the two. Hence, while it is still perfectly possible to find prison studies utterly uninterested in anything outside the prison wall and urban studies seemingly oblivious to the empirical and conceptual connections between prison and urban margins, a new, exciting language is emerging to try to understand these

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links. This special issue contributes in interesting and innovative ways to the development of this new conceptual language from an ethnographic point of view. Let me tease out some of the important insights that are generated in this special issue, both conceptually and empirically.

Empirically, one of the issues that lingers after having read through the contributions is the simple fact that out there in the real world there are a lot of fascinating folk simply struggling to survive and be good people. Personal favourites of mine include Trisa in Brazil trying to keep herself and her family out of prison (Moore), Rachid in France trying to ward off deportation (Boe), PO in Sierra Leone exposing police corruption by impersonating police officers (Schneider) and Bobby in Nicaragua trying not to go back to prison (Weegels). This illustrates the power of ethnography. Each of the contributions builds on strong empirical material and sometimes decade-long engagement with people in and on the brink of confining institutions. Most of the contributions originate in prison or detention (except for Moore's). From there, a number of different methodological choices structure how the authors explore the relationship between prison and the outside. One can follow people out of prison (Weegels, Bandyophadyay); one can do fieldwork in different periods (Cunha); one can follow people in and out of migrant detention (Boe); one can follow family–detainee relationships (Jefferson and Martin, Schneider). Each of these choices are valid and together they form a comprehensive empirical foundation for understanding confinement beyond the carceral institutions. On a final methodological note, the volume also illustrates the value of bringing together cases from the global south and the global north.

One central task emerging from this material is to find ways to conceptually capture the relationship between prison and the outside writ large. Of what does it consist and how can we characterize it? In the Introduction, the editors (Weegels, Jefferson and Martin) propose to look at what they call ethnographies of traversal and porosity where the purpose is 'to push debates on confinement beyond their prison-centric impulse'. Focusing on borders as 'zones of intense contestation' (Jensen and Zenker 2015) rather than as boundaries, they hone in on the ever-negotiated, compromised, osmotic nature of the wall between prison and the outside. Correctly, they identify this as a problem of binary language. How do we transcend easy notions of inside–outside – here or there? Drawing on Ingold, they conclude that prison and street 'always already imply one another'. But in what ways? In each of the contributions different concepts are used to characterize the relationship: transcarceral grip (Weegels), prisons interlocked with heavily penalized communities (Cunha), carceral subjects (Moore), carceral entrapment (Bandyophadyay), connectivity (Jefferson and Martin); carceral continuum (Schneider), *mètis* (Boe). These concepts denote practices of survival, states of being, subjectivity, exercises of power and confinement. In many of the contributions, these more etic concepts are complemented with emic concepts denoting how to cope with detention of self, of kin and of friends. Boe's analyses of *mètis* illustrates this ambition, as does the concept of 'family' in Cunha's contribution and *conhecidos* in Moore's analysis. In my own research, such emic concepts have

been absolutely central as they often designate how people deal with adversity/officialdom (often the same thing). In the Philippines, *diskarte* connotes the ability to cope through a combination of forging relationships and cunning, often depending on making one's own luck (Jensen 2014). In Cape Town, people in townships engage in *skarreling* (lit. scurrying) to find means of survival, again depending on personal qualities, whereas Anna, my friend from rural South Africa, impersonated a wriggling snake with her hand while explaining that she would *chica-chica* to achieve her goal. In much (American-based) urban studies the concept of hustling has been central in understanding how urban residents try to survive. Wacquant (1999: 142) defines hustling as the 'mastery of a particular kind of symbolic capital, namely the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive them, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gains'. While Wacquant's rendition of hustling primarily concerns intra-communal relations, often in highly masculinized ways, it is clearly also relevant to explore the social capital necessary to deal, for instance, with authorities and across racialized, gendered and generational structures of inequality.

As mentioned above, many of the contributions to this special issue originate in prison ethnography. This evidently enables a particular view on the relationship between the inside and the outside. In this way, the outside – or the beyond site – is more opaque, more ambiguous than the inside of the prison. Is it a family, far away, a neighbourhood, specific neighbourhoods? In some of the contributions we can see clear outlines of the outside world and its connections to the inside. Cunha, for instance, explores the temporal developments of the relationship between prison and a number of 'heavily penalized urban neighbourhoods'. She argues that the moral condemnation of other prisoners stopped as the inside and the outside became increasingly connected by people and histories. Her analysis mirrors my analysis of the prison–township circuit in Cape Town, where we explore what we call 'awkward entanglements' between prison and township (Waltorp and Jensen 2019). Cape Town's coloured population has historically been one of the most incarcerated groups in the world and there is a constant circulation between Pollsmoor Prison and the townships. However, whereas Cunha's analysis explores the relationship from the prison, we look at it from the townships. Here, imprisonment was ever problematic. Ex-prisoners were refused access to food, housing and relatives, having to plead at the door, because the respectability of those outside depended on some level of exorcizing amoral family members with a tainting prison history. At the same time, however, outside family members also relied on those on the inside belonging to gangs for protection and help whenever they got into trouble. So, what made for the difference between Cunha's analysis of female prisons in Portugal and our analysis of Cape Town's moral prison economy? It was not the length of the prison–township entanglements in Cape Town, as that has been going on for more than half a century. Was it that we looked from the outside in and Cunha looked primarily from inside out, or were there other reasons for the difference in moral condemnation?

Another insightful example, by no means the only one from the volume, is Hollis Moore's analysis of carceral subjects, which takes as its point of departure the

urban outside. By invoking a concept emanating out of prison studies and making it count in an urban setting in Brazil, Moore is able to bridge urban and prison studies in really interesting ways. By suggesting that most residents in securitized and gang-affected areas can be talked about as 'carceral subjects' – someone for whom prison, violence and confinement are constant possibilities – we begin to see how the connections are real and part of ordinary life. Furthermore, Moore's focus on *conhecidos* – acquaintances – as being networks formed by friends, neighbours, police, municipal workers and others who might help in times of trouble is highly suggestive. The troubles are often connected to the danger of imprisonment. Again, these relations resemble relations from my own field sites in Cape Town and Manila where we explore what we call 'violent exchange' (Jensen and Andersen 2017) as a way to understand how exchange relations are caused and animated by threat or potentiality of violence, not least in the form of detention. In her analysis of street traders and policing in Nairobi, Brigitte Dragsted-Mutengwa (2018) arrives at similar conclusions. Drawing on anthropological exchange theory, she suggests that an economy of violence exists around potential detention. In this reading, detention does not begin at the walls of the prison but extends into police stations, to police vans or even the magistrate's court. All this posits incarceration as absolutely central to urban studies rather than at its margins. Hence, the special issue inspires urban studies broadly to think concertedly about the role of confinement, not only as the fate of many urban residents but as an ever-present element of the urban imaginary and of urban life.

Finally, the ambition of the special issue to think confinement beyond site is highly relevant. One way to do this would be to think beyond spatial categories to include temporality – not only in the study of the prison but also in urban studies. In another special issue, co-edited with Jefferson (Jefferson, Turner and Jensen 2019), we try to do exactly this by positing temporality as central to the workings of and coping with confinement. In this special issue, most contributions focus on spatial dimensions of confinement. However, throughout the special issue there are allusions to temporal dimensions as well. Central to Boe's analysis of deportation centres, for instance, is the concept of *mètis*, the ability to find cracks in (spatial) domination. It is very much about waiting for the right moment. In more complex ways, Schneider's focus on rumours also moves beyond site. Rumours are of course narratives in space, but they can always be denied as having any direct relation to a place in time. This suggests that in fact rumours challenge spaces locked in chronological time. We might say that it is not *either* space *or* time but how space and time relate to one another – what we with Nancy Munn can discuss as space-time configurations (Munn 1986). When we discuss space there is often an assumed temporality – that of linear time – inherent in our analysis (Jensen 2015). But if we begin to think of different temporalities, we understand the complex relation they have to space. Religion, for instance, works with transcendental time as just one example. In my own work (Jensen 2014), I have explored how young men confined in poor urban settlements tap into transcendental imaginaries through joining fraternities to access the epic temporality of the nation. In Jonny Steinberg's

analysis of the South African prison gangs (Steinberg 2004), he explores how the narratives of Nongoloza (a real-life figure from the early twentieth century as well as a mythical character) inform present practices and relate in complex ways to a colonial history of South Africa – but clearly not one that most historians, preoccupied with chronological time, would recognize. These examples allow us to understand temporalities as what Achille Mbembe calls 'emergent time' and 'time of entanglement' (2001: 14–17), as animating ever-contested and plural forms of subjectivity.

Taken together, the special issue and the individual contributions allow us to ask new kinds of questions about confinement beyond site. They demonstrate the power of ethnography as well as how much urban studies can learn from thinking about confinement beyond the prison. Perhaps, then, it is becoming as important to think about confinement beyond the prison as it is to think about the urban as crucially entangled with confinement.

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