

DIALOGUES

Dialogue on the Status of Prison Ethnography and Carceral Tours: An Introduction

Justin Piché and Kevin Walby

In 2002, Loïc Wacquant wrote an article titled “The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration”. Professor of Sociology and Research Associate at Boalt Law School’s Institute for Legal Research at the University of California Berkeley, Loïc Wacquant is author or editor of 12 recent books translated into a dozen languages. He has collaborated with the most prominent sociologists and anthropologists of the late 20th century, including Pierre Bourdieu (1992) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002). Co-founder of the journal *Ethnography*, Wacquant’s research explores connections between urban poverty, racialization and the proliferation of carceral spaces in neo-liberal societies. Having documented how new criminal justice policies and practices of imprisonment are diffusing from the United States to Western Europe (see Wacquant 1999), his research emphasizes ethnographic data collection strategies (for instance, see Wacquant 2004) yet is truly global in its scope as well as its influence.

As the introduction for a special issue of the journal *Ethnography* on “Dissecting the Prison”, Wacquant (2002, p. 371) begins the piece by taking “the reader inside the Los Angeles County Jail, the largest detention facility in the ‘Free World’, to give a ground-level sense of how the entry portal of the US detention system operates”. He accomplishes this by unpacking his observations gleaned from tours of the facility led by jail staff and drawing on information about the institution, as well as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Based on this encounter with the carceral, Wacquant notes that one of the salient features of imprisonment is “the total subjection to the permanent and pervasive gaze of others who are themselves subjected to the same ongoing visual and sensory penetration” (ibid, p. 382). Having contributed to this “denial of any ‘backstage’, of any ‘territory of intimacy’” as a tourist in the Los Angeles County Jail, he then expresses a sense “of embarrassment, of ‘dirtiness’, to have infringed on the dignity of human beings by the mere fact of having been there and seen that place, and thus to have treated its

denizens as one might the occupants of a zoo” (ibid). Despite the sentiments outlined above, Wacquant maintains that “it is indispensable to go see, touch, feel” (ibid). Building on this argument, the second half of his paper focuses on the need to conduct ethnographic field work, arguing that there has been a decline of such research in recent decades, a claim that has been made by others including Simon (2000) and Piché (2008).

This provocative article prompted us to send copies of his piece and write letters to past *JPP* contributors asking if they would contribute to a *Dialogue* responding to Wacquant’s widely-cited piece. In response to our call for contributions, we received a number of submissions including a piece from Jon Marc Taylor on the role of prison writing and prisoner ethnography today. In his article, he puts into question the existence of a “curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration” by pointing to the presence of scholarly works authored or co-authored by prisoners in recent decades. This article is then followed by a contribution from Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury who draw on classic works in the field of anthropology to illustrate how carceral tours fall well short of providing an ethnography of the prison.

Pieces written by Eugene Dey, Charles Huckelbury and Craig Minogue also focus on the merits and limits of utilizing carceral tours as an ethnographic research method. Drawing on how they themselves – as prisoners – experience and make sense of the rounds upon rounds of bureaucrats, administrators, architects and academics who enter carceral spaces to cast their gaze for various purposes, the authors also critique the ethics of a practice in which they are, in more cases than not, unwillingly objectified research subjects whose voices are omitted. In response to the issues raised in one of these pieces, an anonymous reviewer noted:

Few academics – and even fewer prison visitors for that matter – ever reflect on ethical issues vis-à-vis the prisoners they are likely to encounter while circulating within the spaces of a prison. This manuscript puts everyone against the wall and forces them to rethink their purposes and their selves.

Given the continued frequency of carceral tours and the likelihood that such a practice will continue to be a part of the prison enterprise for years to come, a discussion on how carceral tours can be run in an ethical manner

that does not objectify prisoners is long overdue. The contributors in this issue provide some suggestions to this end.

The *Dialogues* section is a forum to facilitate an interchange of ideas amongst prisoners and fellow travelers. As such, a number of the contributions were shared with conference participants at the 2009 Meeting of the Canadian Society of Criminology who attended a panel organized by the *JPP*. The *Response* is based on discussions which took place at the event. We also invited Loïc Wacquant to respond to the critical commentaries regarding his widely-cited article and he graciously accepted our invitation. His contribution will appear in Volume 19(1) of the *JPP*.

Our hope is that this exchange will foster future discussions regarding the status of prison ethnography and also the place of carceral tours, which have and continue to be a staple in criminological education. Moving forward, we invite suggested topics for future *Dialogues* which will appear in upcoming issues.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piché, Justin (2008) "Editor's Introduction – Barriers to Knowing Inside: Education in Prisons and Education on Prisons", *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 17(1): 4-17.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Loïc Wacquant (eds.) (2002) *Commodifying Bodies*, Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage Publications.
- Simon, Jonathan (2000) "The 'Society of Captives' in the Era of Hyper-Incarceration", *Theoretical Criminology*, 4(3): 285-308.
- Wacquant, Loïc (2004) *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc (2002) "The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration", *Ethnography*, 3(4): 371-397.
- Wacquant, Loïc (1999) *Les Prisons de la misère*, Paris: Raisons d'agir Éditions/Éditions du Seuil.

Using examples from fieldwork in Kentucky, including Appalachian prison communities and a site of penal tourism, this article proposes a counter-visual ethnography to better perceive the ideological prison work that the carceral state performs in the spatial and cultural landscape. A counter-visual ethnography retrains our eyes to see that which is not there but which structures the contemporary empirical realities we observe, record, and analyze: the ghosts of racialized regimes past, the sediment of dirty industry that seeps into and imbues the present, and the trans-historical and trans-local condition of the carceral condition, ethnography does not decide upon the object of its study in advance. Rather, the ethnographer enters the prison with a. Centered on the ethnography of prisons and field research on penal confinement, this review maps out current developments and characterizes them in relation to key themes that shaped earlier approaches. Further internationalizing the ethnographic discussion on prisons by broadening the predominant focus on the United States and the English-speaking world, the review is organized around a main line of discussion: the prison-society relation and the articulation between intramural and extramural worlds. nature of tourists (younger or older, 'grey' or 'third age' tourism- products geared specifically to older or retired people, gay tourism) type of tourism purchased such as (inclusive tour, independent travel, and tailor-made travel). what are the two different market segments to consider. the anticipation phase, the realization phase, the recollection phase. what are the three stages before and after travel. climate. a large system in which the atmosphere interacts with other elements. a push factor for tourism. a resource encouraging the development of tourism, a constraint limiting the appeal. Metaphors for Prison: A Dialogue. Chris Philo (School of Geographical & Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow) : Back to Foucault, again (sorry): star power and another look at Foucauldian carceral geographies. It may be that carceral geographers/prison researchers feel that we know all we need to know about Michel Foucault, the French intellectual and critical social historian. His seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1976), with its discussion of Bentham's Panopticon, related penal forms and a widening carceral archipelago, is relatively familiar if still maybe not as fully appreciated. Introduction prison identities Our objective in this chapter is to offer some insights from a broadly ethnographic study of two men's prisons in south east England conducted between 2006 and 2008. The study sought to explore the dynamics of difference and their impact on social relations in the late modern prison. Later on the same fieldnote and the corresponding one by the co-author, Rod, a white man of middle class origin, signalled a substantive partiality in the engagement of prisoners around issues of racism from prison officers, a finding often observed in other studies (CRE 2003a, Cheliotis and Liebling, 2006, NOMS 2008, Phillips, 2012), but one which emerged differently for.