

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Unsettling Reflections

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The prisoner as ethnographer. The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) has always been about recording the lived experience of people imprisoned by the state. As a consequence, the *JPP* is an important counterpoint to the rampant right-wing discourse that is often treated as truth in corporate media and political discourse (see Gaucher, 2002). Over its history, the journal has provided a platform for investigating prison experiences for prisoners and fellow travellers from across the globe. Doing so allows us to critically consider the transcarceral commonality of captivity, while highlighting unique or emerging issues. This issue of the *JPP* follows that tradition and reminds the reader that the struggles inside sometimes mirror those in 'free' society.

In this issue, death in custody is a major theme. Dying in prison emerged organically as a topic. However, it was brought into stark focus for our Editorial Board when Peter Collins, a frequent contributor to the *JPP*, passed away as we were assembling this text. Justin Piché reflects on Peter's life and work, along with deaths in custody in his *Response* at the end of this issue. Before that, Ernest Jack considers the possibility of his own death behind bars. In another contribution, John L. Lennon opens by acknowledging that his greatest fear is dying in prison, before going on to eulogize his friend Lenny who recently suffered this fate. While these pieces reflect on death by natural causes in an unnatural environment, Victor Becerra's article poignantly describes the isolation that leads to suicide in prison. In these works, we are asked to consider life and death behind bars. At a time when activists across the United States are demanding that all of us recognize that "black lives matter" (Petersen-Smith, 2015) we must, in the same anti-colonialist spirit, recognize that imprisoned lives matter too.

The prisoners' sense that their lives do not matter to prison staff and administrators is evident also in the discussions of healthcare that Shawn Fisher, Ernest Jack and Timothy Muise provide this issue. These men speak to the lack of access to medical care, the bureaucracy that makes the most basic testing difficult to acquire, and the way in which their treatment (or lack thereof) is part of a broader systemic attitude towards criminalized persons. Their struggles resonate because we recognize our own frustrations in getting adequate health care. However, the 'free' have the ability to get

a second opinion, to go elsewhere for treatment, to access non-western medicine, none of which are options for many who are incarcerated. A common problem can have uncommon consequences for the prisoner.

Author Robert Blackash considers homo-sociality in his work on men imprisoned in Britain. Here too we see the link between preoccupations in mainstream society and the microcosm that is prison. His article considers queerness and intimacy in prison in a non-exceptionalizing way that does not affirm the LGBT stereotypes too often seen in the media machine.

This sense of being considered ‘other’ – of being different or less deserving of even the most basic human rights – forms the basis of Craig Minogue’s piece on accountability in Australian prisons. At a time when neoliberal doctrine demands that prisoners accept responsibility, those same individuals demand that the various industrial complexes in society do the same. For example, Jarrod Shook demands accountability in how prisoner security classification and pay for labour is determined in Canada’s federal prisons. While specific carceral settings affect prisoners uniquely, the basic concern for accountability and transparency transcend the prison walls.

The *Prisoners’ Struggles* contributions likewise address the issue of accountability. Zaineb Mohammed reflects on the various projects of the Ella Baker Centre for Human Rights, while Madeleine Spain discusses the work of Justice Action in Prisons.

Fighting off the otherness created by imprisonment is difficult. In Greg Webb’s article, the author notes that prisoners use consumption of ‘street goods’ (in this case, athletic shoes) to feel part of ‘free’ society and maintain hope. As peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1991, p. 41) noted: “hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today”. It is this idea that there is hope, and perhaps forgiveness, in the future that compels author J. John Fry to consider the bleak implications of recent changes to the legislation that governs criminal record pardons in Canada.

The *JPP* has a role to play in maintaining hope. Not only does the journal afford the opportunity for scholars to read ‘from the ground up’ about prisoners. It gives the authors the knowledge that they are being heard, to know that their experiences resonate, to connect with the world outside the prison, to feel that their lives do indeed matter.

REFERENCES

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