

## PREFACE FROM THE MANAGING EDITORS

### Points on a Continuum of Violence and Deprivation

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This is an important and powerful issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP), and it has been a privilege to watch it come together. Issue editors Christine Gervais and Maritza Felices-Luna solicited and compiled the articles, while members of our Editorial Board handled the peer-reviewing. Thus, our first serious encounter with the issue involved reading the completed draft manuscript in a single intense and emotionally-trying sitting. Encountering these narratives of violation, dehumanization, survival, resistance and remembrance can leave the reader speechless – but only for a short time. Ultimately, they invite solidarity, mobilization and action.

In some ways, this issue represents a departure from familiar *JPP* terrain, both geographically and in terms of subject matter. The inclusion of the voices of prisoners from El Salvador, Honduras, Iran and Sri Lanka extends the scope of our ongoing exploration of the carceral, and, like our special issue on “post”-colonial Nigeria (Volume 14-1, 2005), brings welcomed non-western perspectives. In other ways, this issue continues and builds upon important recurring themes explored by *JPP* contributors: systematized violence, the collateral consequences of incarceration, the universal character of the experiences of confinement and its lingering effects, the enduring importance of writing as resistance, and broad questions about the nature and pursuit of justice as well as accountability. Torture, both physical and psychological, has been discussed in a number of past *JPP* articles. Volume 15-1 (2006) was dedicated to the theme of political imprisonment, broadly conceived as the use of imprisonment as a tactic to stifle political dissent, and other special issues – on Irish republican prisoners (Volume 7-1, 1996-1997) and on the Black Panther Party (Volume 15-2 / 16-1, 2006-2007), for example – have also focused on the accounts of political prisoners. Many past contributors have argued persuasively that *all* imprisonment is inherently political.

This volume of the *JPP* is the first that has been entirely dedicated to the combined theme of torture and political imprisonment. While many of the accounts in this collection speak of incidents that occurred decades ago, they continue to be timely, as practices of torture, indefinite detention without charge or trial, and refoulement<sup>2</sup> remain fixtures of contemporary (in)security campaigns led by authoritarian and nominally democratic regimes alike. Meanwhile, the public debate about torture – and it shocks

the conscience that there is *actually a debate* – is heavily influenced by callous instrumental discourses that contemplate torture as a necessary and permissible means to a legitimate end, make use of official euphemisms such as “enhanced interrogation” or “rendition”, and employ careful denials of direct involvement or knowledge made possible by outsourcing and the use of proxies. Countering these narratives involves challenging the sanitized language and hypothetical ‘ticking bomb’ scenarios of proponents and apologists by presenting the accounts of victims and survivors of torture, which is what this issue of the *JPP* sets out to do. This resonates with our overarching mission, which is in part to facilitate the development of a discourse that competes with incomplete, popular and conventional definitions and constructions of prisoners and methods of social control, and in part to promote accountability and basic human rights.<sup>1</sup>

In reflecting upon the many contributions made by the authors in this volume, it seems important to underscore what Angela Davis (2005, p. 62) recognizes as the “essential connections between everyday prison violence and torture”, as well as between the carceral sites of the domestic prison, the military prison and the immigration detention centre. As she suggests, “[r]ather than rely on a taxonomy of those acts that are defined as torture and those that are not, it may be more revealing to examine how one set of institutionalized practices actually enables the other” (Davis, 2005, p. 63). Similar arguments have been made by others (see Dayan 2007; McCulloch and Scraton 2009) including *JPP* Associate Editor Charles Huckelbury (2006), who notes that the routine and ‘mundane’ abuses that characterize U.S. prisons are generally accepted and explained away by a public that is complicit in the maintenance of the carceral system. There are many threads linking these everyday cruelties to the acts of systematic brutality described by the contributors to this issue. We mention this not to suggest a simplistic equivalency between all experiences of confinement, violation and coercion, but rather to draw attention to the institutions, practices and forms of power and resistance that link all encounters with the carceral. These issues will certainly be front and centre at the *Thirteenth International Conference on Penal Abolition* (ICOPA XIII) taking place in Belfast this summer, where ongoing efforts towards policing and justice reform are taking place in the shadow of a history of political violence and incarceration.

The quality of a text arguably lies in its ability to captivate the attention of readers and to compel them to ponder new questions or revisit old ones with new lenses. When reading this collection, you may find yourself reconsidering the meaning of justice and accountability at a time when these concepts have been colonized by retributively-oriented

authorities who prefer to operate in secrecy. You may also find yourself reconsidering the limits of the human spirit, courage and forgiveness. In seeking direction for how to respond to ‘crimes’, whether committed by those in positions of power or the poor, the authors in this volume remind us that prisoners – who have experienced the various points along the continuum of violence and deprivation – have a great deal to contribute and ought to occupy a central place in the debate about our (post-)carceral future.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For *JPP* Mission see <http://www.jpp.org/Mission.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> Refoulement is the deportation or removal of refugees to places where they may be persecuted, which is prohibited by international law. Canada recognizes this prohibition, but in its 2002 ruling in the *Suresh* case, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that “We do not exclude the possibility that in exceptional circumstances, deportation to face torture might be justified, either as a consequence of the balancing process mandated by S.7 of the Charter or under S.1”. While the executive has never invoked the so-called ‘Suresh exception’, its existence illustrates the extent to which all branches of government – including the judiciary – have succumbed to the temptation to entertain hypothetical limits to the absolute prohibition of torture.

### REFERENCES

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