

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Footprints to Freedom: Journeys of State-Driven Torture, Liberation and Justice

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*Bloody footprints left behind by prisoners as they are
forced to walk out of the torture chamber.*

*The bloody print of a naked foot intentionally etched
on the wall of a prisoner's cell.*

*Boot marks perturbing the quiet pools of blood on the
floor of an interrogation room.*

The footprint images depicted by the contributors to this edition¹ of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* embody the oppressive relation between those subjected to torture and the government officials who are indoctrinated to consider the former a threat to the state. The extreme violence deployed on the body, mind and soul of prisoners aimed at dehumanising them is constructed by government representatives as legitimate practices of justice in detention centres around the world. In such confining and brutalizing contexts, prisoners vanish in the “belly of the beast” (Abbot, 1981) – a place strategically hidden from view to hinder human rights monitoring and regulation by local civil society as well as the international community. Such clandestine arrangements form part of the calculated orchestration and to some extent the normalization of state-based denial and deception related to torture and other human rights abuses in penal settings (Cohen, 2001; Crelinsten, 2003; Matthews and Kauzlarich, 2007).

Such collusion fortifies the combined use of imprisonment and torture as tools of oppressive regimes to control, distort, weaken and even erase people's memories (Mandela, 2005, p. 9). Yet, the authors in this issue have manifested their challenge against the state-based attacks on their memories both through acts of resistance during their incarceration and through writing their narratives in this journal. The first instance is exemplified particularly in the aforementioned image of the bloody footprint intentionally etched on the prison wall. As is shared in more detail later in Anahita Rahmanizadeh's narrative, the image is derived from her memory of a fellow captive's courageous and deliberate attempt to leave a concrete reminder of his existence and suffering at the prison prior to his execution. Such an act is a powerful symbol not only of

resistance against injustice, but also of the struggle toward justice which often involves the painful pitting of remembering against forgetting (Mandela, 2005, p. 9; Cohen, 2001, pp. 237, 241).

In the second instance, although exceedingly taxing emotionally for the authors, they have shown an admirable determination to remember their experiences in an effort to overcome their torturers' attack on their minds and bodies. By sharing their memories that have been variously dominated by state power, they have unravelled paralysing silences (Mandela, 2005, p. 9). In so doing, they have contributed to broader academic and grassroots efforts to thwart states' denials of the human rights atrocities for which they are responsible (Cohen, 1996, p. 522; Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001, p. 185; Rothe and Friedrichs, 2006, p. 148).

It is through the means of '*truth-telling*' and towards the end of '*never again*' that we have compiled the stories and privileged the voices of women and men who have endured torture and the deprivation of liberty at the hands of the state, along with those of surviving family members (French, 2009). The authors are all former political prisoners or surviving relatives who, at the time of writing their narratives, were residing in Canada as refugees, immigrants and / or citizens. The four female and four male authors originate from either Central America or the Middle East. Their stories reflect on concurrent conditions of imprisonment, violence, resistance and justice in various forms and through distinct phases.

In their narratives, the authors also depict the society they lived in prior to their arrest as being characterised by state-based systemic violence and seemingly permanent situations of rampant injustice. Through a diversity of paths, including active involvement in state opposition, as a bystander or simply being part of the constructed "enemy" group, the authors found themselves detained. While the contributors describe candidly the extreme state-based violence they suffered, their narratives also convey their strategies of survival and resistance which, despite varying in form – violent, non-violent, physical, psychological, and so on – were aimed to ensure their survival and preserve their dignity and humanity. Although torture is a central element in their detention experience, the authors also address the overall living conditions, their personal use of the physical space of their cell and of the prison, as well as the life-saving, life-breaking and life-taking relations with other political and non-political prisoners, and with prison guards. To varying degrees, the authors reflect upon such dynamics through gendered, cultural, religious and age-appropriate lenses.²

A significant commonality among the narratives is the centrality of government, imprisonment and justice after their release. In fact, freedom is never actually fully obtained and nor does state violence really end

upon the authors' release from prison. Their respective governments have discriminated against them, limited their possibility of obtaining a livelihood, restricted their reintegration into society and threatened to arrest and torture them again at any time. In some cases, the authors in this collection were actually detained and tortured twice. Furthermore, the psychological and social consequences of their detention and torture are such that the authors find themselves imprisoned by their experience. This prison, despite lacking physical barriers, is just as restraining and violent. The authors cannot escape the memories and find themselves not only reliving their experiences of detention and torture, but they also become further isolated from family and friends due to emotional and physical disconnections. As a result, the formerly tortured and imprisoned, as well as their family members find themselves constricted emotionally, economically, socially and politically.

Due to the state and non-state barriers inhibiting the viability of their future, the contributors find themselves with exile as the only option available to them. The decision to leave their country is difficult and fraught with uncertainties. It becomes another source of pain and anguish as they are confronted with the scepticism of bureaucrats. Their pursuit of freedom and safety through immigration involves an endless telling and retelling of their experiences which in turn are challenged and in some cases refuted. As such, immigration becomes in itself an intrusive process orchestrated by representatives of the very government from which they are seeking help. Caught amidst the increasingly criminalising, and therefore restrictive and punitive refugee policies (Pickering, 2005), some authors actually re-experienced imprisonment when they were detained in refugee camps while their claims were investigated. This process represents yet another type of warped practice of 'justice' in which the authors are confronted with the violence of a state legitimised by the threat that they allegedly represent. In fact, the procedure to obtain refugee status forces the authors to demonstrate that their lives are at risk and to prove that they have actually been tortured or persecuted. If unsuccessful, they risk a new cycle of detention, torture and death. Hence, the long wait required by the process is filled with distress and uncertainty which fuels the negative consequences of torture and detention and further weakens an already frail individual. However, once the contributors are granted refugee status or are allowed to immigrate, another form of imprisonment ensues. They are confronted with a different culture, language and system which, compounded by their experiences of torture and detention, traps them within invisible walls. The authors and their families are thus locked in a cycle which condemns them to further emotional withdrawal, solitude, anger and frustration.

Notwithstanding this trying process and utmost gruelling experiences, the authors reveal that amidst this internal and external turmoil, they encounter individuals and organisations that help them economically, psychologically, legally and socially to create conditions where they can be released from the invisible prison they had unwillingly co-constructed with their captors. Furthermore, resistance strategies continue to be engaged in order to survive and salvage a sense of the self that existed before their detention and torture. Part of their strategies of resistance is to conceptualise justice in a different way from what they have experienced through their ordeal. The authors thus battle within themselves to be released from the yearning of retributive justice towards their captors and torturers and to embrace a form of restorative justice that acknowledges the harm caused and responsabilises those involved.

This special issue on torture is an important contribution to debates on imprisonment, state and justice. Through a discussion of this “extreme” display of state power, the authors reveal and expose the cogs and components of a system where the use of violence by the state takes place within its prisons and is legitimised through a corrupted appeal to justice and the use of the justice system. Furthermore, the contributions unveil the continuity of these practices and of their consequences through time and space as they become embodied in the prisoner and their family. Thus, the state no longer requires prison walls or the torturer to exercise its power over its subjects. The prisoner and their families are hence left to “resist or perish” in a battle taking place within themselves. A successful resistance requires the exteriorisation and disembodiment of the state’s practices and their consequences, a reconstruction of social bonds, a re-conceptualisation of justice and a transformation of the tie between the citizen and the state. Although such resistance appears to be individualistic, it follows the same logic and hence is in fact the particularised mode and process of a larger movement aiming to challenge and criticise the triad: state, prison and justice.

In “Survival by Solidarity”, Adrian López shares for the first time a profoundly moving account of his arduous experience of torture, imprisonment and survival as a teacher and prisoner advocate turned political prisoner in El Salvador. López’s reflection sheds powerful light on the universality of human suffering, the complexities of political resistance and the enduring value of solidarity. He also shares a torture survivor’s vision of justice that is beyond his own personal needs – one that is oriented instead toward collective well-being and shared progress.

Within the context of political repression in Iran, Saeideh’s article “With My Child In Jail” recounts her and her infant son’s traumatic long term incarceration that began with a torturous and sexually violent

interrogation with her four month old child by her side. Her guilt-ridden sexual exchange with a guard for food to save the life of her dying infant reflects the all too frequently deceptive relations between male captors and female captives. Saeideh's narrative also sheds light on an imprisoned mother's resourcefulness and her child's resilience in the face of unimaginable obstacles in stifling and disease-ridden prison conditions.

In "A Daughter's Cry for Justice", Osiris López provides a child's unique perspective on the enduring emotional impact of political oppression, torture and disappearance in Honduras. Her reflection on the complex contexts of loss through a parent's brutal death and of the subsequent displacement through forced migration sheds light on the shifting and varied spaces of confinement. Her reflexive account of her pursuit of justice demonstrates the fragility and seeming irreconcilability inherent to the simultaneous quest for retribution and healing.

In "My Changing Idea of Justice", Ezat Mossallanejed provides a compelling autobiographical account of how his prolonged experience of torture and imprisonment in Iran as well as his challenging encounters as a refugee and eventually as a counsellor have shaped and re-shaped his evolving and profound sense of justice. Mossallanejed's deep insight into coping, reconciliation and resilience illustrates the remarkable potential of human resourcefulness to mitigate the experiences of torture and injustice.

In "Reflections of an Iranian Political Prisoner", Mino Homily recounts her four year ordeal as a Kurdish adolescent female in Iranian prisons, torture chambers and execution yards which began at the age of fifteen. While exploring her own journey through various perceptions of justice over time, Homily sheds light on the socio-political context of Iran, as well as on the persecution of Iranian minorities and political dissidents.

In "Justice Beyond My Ordeal", Anahita Rahmanizadeh's narrative explores her own experience of torture and injustice to illustrate the significance of the ideal of justice as an impetus for the resistance of oppression. Her account also draws attention to the particular plight of female political prisoners in the context of patriarchal Iranian society.

Krishnabahawan Karalapillai's personal account on "Torture, Justice and the Agony of Immigration" is a testament to the pervasive impact that torture has on the mental health of survivors. He further reflects on the endless obstacles that he has faced with Canadian immigration as a torture survivor who struggles with mental illness. Throughout his ordeals, he has remained committed to a vision of justice that promotes compassion, faith and accessibility.

Within the gripping details of “My Journey from Torture to Harmony”, Daniel shares a personal narrative on the lingering traumatic effects of torture and imprisonment in El Salvador. In addition to his reflection on the unique interactions between political and non-political prisoners, Daniel shares with extraordinary passion both the pitfalls and potential of healing-oriented justice and forgiveness towards oneself, one’s family and even one’s state.

Following the main articles, the issue continues with a *Response* by Alex Neve of Amnesty International Canada through which he reflects on the universal and enduring effects of torture by situating the authors’ personal experiences from twenty years ago within the context of contemporary political challenges in the fight against torture. The *Prisoners’ Struggles* section of this issue includes overviews of the resources available to torture survivors and their families in North America and Europe through the following organizations: Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC International), the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ) and Le Centre Exil. The issue closes with book reviews of William Sampson’s *Confessions of an Innocent Man: Torture and Survival in a Saudi Prison*, Kerry Pither’s *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror* and Richard Matthews’ *The Absolute Violation: Why Torture Must Be Prohibited*. Front and back cover art are provided by Daniel, a contributing author to this issue.

The testimonies shared in this issue constitute experiences of detention and torture that occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century. In the cases from Central America, atrocities were perpetrated by Latin American militaries financed and supported politically by the United States (McSherry and Mejia, 1999), who also taught them the use of barbaric ‘interrogation’ tactics through the notorious School of the Americas.³ The cases from the Middle East represent the complex ironies of being tortured under regimes that are partially supported by the West, yet simultaneously fighting against it. In all the experiential accounts herein, the authors have grappled with the devastating human consequences of national state terror that has been corrupted and compounded by the political and economic influences of other countries.

As we near the end to the first decade of the 21st century, unfortunately the shadows of state repression still haunt much of the world. The long term effects of torture and disappearances, as well as the prevalence of impunity hinder both individual and collective quests for justice and peace. Worse still, the depraved indifferences towards human life as

manifested through torture and disappearances remain an undeniable and unending reality for countless individuals, families, communities and countries around the world today. It is the extent of the continued use of torture worldwide that behoved us to combine our scholarship with activism (Wise, 1999, p. 184), with a view to enabling the voices of unknown or less well known torture survivors to contribute to the academic debates that attempt to draw closer attention within criminology not only to state crime, but especially to the actual harms inflicted against people that result from state action (Green and Ward 2000; Matthews and Kauzlarich, 2007; Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001).

The very personal and grounded accounts of torture presented in this issue further reflect the vital importance of continued efforts to scrutinize the illegal, inhuman and violent activities of states (Tomb and Whyte, 2003), to hold them responsible for the psychiatric health and therapeutic needs of its citizens (Moon, 2009), and to persist unflinchingly at preventing torture from occurring in the first place (Crelinsten, 2003). The testimonies included herein are also indicative of the significance of human rights and justice as integral components of national stability and international peace (Monshipouri and Welch, 2001, p. 401). On individual levels, through the sharing of their own truth, the authors have revealed their experiences and expectations of justice as victim-survivors and rights-bearers (Laplante and Theidon, 2007). By reflecting on their evolving visions of justice in the aftermath of their ordeals, they have shed light on both the challenges and potential of their chosen, yet varied options that include retributive, restorative, reconciliatory and social justice. Regardless of the complexities that may emerge through their diverse quests for justice, torture survivors must always be given inclusive opportunities to inform post-detention and post-conflict initiatives that encourage acknowledgement, accountability, redress and ultimately prevention so as to safeguard the human rights to which they are entitled as fellow world citizens.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This edition of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* originated in a workshop entitled “Experiencing War, Conceptualizing Justice” that we co-chaired during the Laboratory for Justice Studies and Research (LJSR)’s 1st International Symposium that was held on April 12, 2007 within the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. The symposium’s theme was “Thinking About (In)Justices”.

- ² Here ‘age-appropriate’ refers to the authors’ retrospective reflections of their experiences that occurred in the distant past and in some cases, from the perspectives of adults reflecting on their childhood experiences.
- ³ The School of the Americas was renamed the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC) in 2001. However, it is still commonly referred to as its original name of School of the Americas. To its critics, it is referred to as the School of Assassins.

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