

## RESPONSE

### **Dialogue on the Status of Prison Ethnography and Carceral Tours From the 2009 Meeting of the Canadian Society of Criminology** *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*

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The first issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP)* included articles written by prisoners presented at the Third International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA III) in Montreal. This longstanding practice of sharing the work of our contributors at academic and activist conferences continues today.

On October 3, the *JPP* hosted a 90 minute panel discussion entitled “Prisoners on Prisons: Problematizing Carceral Tours and Prison Ethnography” at the 2009 Meeting of the Canadian Society of Criminology hosted by the University of Ottawa. Chaired by Dawn Moore, Editorial Board member and professor of law at Carleton University, excerpts were read from *Dialogue* contributions sole-authored by prisoners including Craig Minogue, Eugene Dey, Charles Huckelbury and Jon Marc Taylor. The panel was well-attended by a range of conference participants, including undergraduate and graduate students, as well as professors – some of whom are involved with the journal.

After 15 minute excerpts from each of the articles were read to the audience along with a brief commentary by each of the readers, a lively 30 minute discussion period facilitated by Dawn Moore ensued, covering a range of issues raised by the contributors. In keeping with the title of the panel and the theme of this issue’s *Dialogues* section, carceral tours and prison ethnography were the central topics of debate.

While the meaning of the term ‘ethnography’ is contested, generally, it is understood that this approach to social research involves the sustained immersion of the researcher in a given milieu that allows for up-close observation and participation in a particular cultural setting. From the outset, it appeared that there was a consensus in the room that carceral tours – as a cursory, temporary, distanced and partial form of immersion into the prison fraught with power imbalances – do not represent a form of ethnographic research. That said the question was posed: what other sociological purposes can carceral tours serve? It was suggested that an image of imprisonment is being (re)produced through this practice. Thus,

for researchers this production ought to be an object of examination in and of itself.

As flawed as prison tours are, carceral tours were advanced by some professors in attendance as a means to bring their students into contact with people and places that can only be treated abstractly in the university classroom. It was suggested, that to not participate in carceral tours might reflect a refusal to look at and acknowledge the pain of others. However, it was also recognized that these practices can be injurious to prisoners who are often subjected to tours without being given the opportunity to influence their design or content, a point noted frequently by *Dialogue* contributors. While the need to witness atrocity was maintained by some in the audience, there was a concern that carceral tours, as they are most often conducted, are voyeuristic. To avoid this pitfall, discussion participants emphasized that persons on carceral tours need to recognize that there are ethical imperatives they ought to follow such as acknowledging prisoners they encounter or refusing to enter spaces of prisons where they would violate the privacy of prisoners. It was also noted that an ethical approach to carceral tours should take into account the subject positions of both the prisoner and the tour participant.

With this in mind, audience members began to explore how they could put into practice the recommendations made by Craig Minogue, Eugene Dey and Charles Huckelbury about how carceral tours could be conducted in an ethical fashion. Two of the panel participants who have filled requests under the federal Access to Information Act and obtained Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) penitentiary tour regulations and scripts, suggested that carceral tours in Canada can be highly contrived. It was also noted that one of the *Dialogue* participants, Craig Minogue, had previously submitted such requests in Australia yielding similar results. By bringing this information together with the guidelines provided by *Dialogue* contributors, it was recommended that interested parties could attempt to arrange federal penitentiary tours in concert with prisoners and then approach CSC to push for the arrangement. One audience member stated that she would attempt to undertake such an initiative and intends to report back through the *JPP*.

Judging by the nods of those present as the contributions were being read, most seemed to agree with the majority of points presented. That said, some disagreed with the position of a number of the *Dialogue* contributors regarding participation in tours led by prisoners chosen by the administration. While the contributors suggest that prisoners hand-picked

by staff would likely paint a rosy picture of the state of carceral affairs, some conference participants wondered whether limiting tours to those led by oppositional prisoners would represent a privileging of certain voices based on a subjective judgement of whose voice is authentic. Such an approach might risk the silencing of an important segment of the prison population. Could tours not be conducted in a way that would capture a wide variety of voices inside?

On this issue of representation, some audience members pointed out the lack of knowledge about tours in women's prisons, or how tours in jails – where sometimes male tourists and male prisoners cast their gaze upon women prisoners – affect the experiences of women in carceral spaces. It was argued the voices of women prisoners need to be part of the *JPP Dialogue* in the future.

As previously mentioned, prison ethnography was also a focus of discussion amongst conference participants. Based on Jon Marc Taylor's contribution to the *Dialogue*, a number of issues were raised. Central to the discussion was whether academics positioned externally to the institution could conduct ethnographic research that would excavate the realities of imprisonment. One participant, who had previously conducted interviews with female prisoners in the Canadian context, noted that research with ex-prisoners is often preferable as they seem to be more comfortable divulging information outside the prison setting where confidentiality can be better protected and risks of retribution from 'correctional' authorities for participating in studies are significantly diminished. Noting the many access barriers faced by those wishing to conduct critical research inside Canadian prisons, another conference participant noted that academics from her university were working with their research ethics board to pressure CSC and other penal institutions to remove the current blockade keeping social scientists from entering the carceral system for the purposes of academic inquiry.

Attention then turned to discussing alternative modes of knowledge pertaining to imprisonment. Prisoner writing found within the academic journals such as the *JPP*, scholarly books, novels and plays were all suggested as viable forms of knowledge to be mobilized by researchers to understand incarceration and its role within society.

Conference participants also discussed the ramifications of the prisoner / academic co-researcher model described by Jon Marc Taylor. Of particular concern was whether academics involved in such a research configuration

would be placing their imprisoned co-researcher at risk of retaliation from prison administrators and frontline staff who may not appreciate the critiques directed at their institutions or work; the implication being that if the risk is too great, academics ought to pull the plug on the collaboration to protect their co-researcher. A professor responded that, ultimately, it is the prisoner in the position of co-researcher who is best situated to assess the risks they may encounter as a result of their participation, and thus, they must be empowered to make the choice as to whether or no they wish to participate in a collaborative study. Given the many examples of successful collaborative ‘inside-outside’ efforts, including the contribution by Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury to this *Dialogue*, the co-researcher model is arguably one worth promoting and expanding. As one conference delegate noted, the approach interrupts the researcher-subject relationship – with associated power imbalances – that characterizes other forms of research. This collaborative arrangement recognizes the diverse locations of authority (inside and outside), de-centres the ‘ivory tower’ and its tendency to observe the ‘other’ from a distance, and introduces the prisoner to the scholarly debate as a partner. Additionally, insofar as this form of collaboration is covered under freedom of speech laws, it represents nothing more and nothing less than an exercise in collaborative research and expression. It therefore offers a means of working around institutional barriers to access, both in the prison and the university. This was cited as being important because just as academic colleagues often collaborate to share expertise, so too can academics and prisoners co-author important works.

It should be noted that each of the contributions were received positively and the degree to which the audience was engaged during the question period was arguably unlike anything else seen or experienced at the conference. As the *Dialogue on Prison Ethnography and Carceral Tours* continues, we encourage and look forward to contributions from other prisoners and fellow travellers on additional issues concerning imprisonment and punishment.