

DIALOGUES

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

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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.

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