

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Exploring narrative, convictions and autoethnography as a convict criminologist

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Earle, Rod (2021). Exploring narrative, convictions and autoethnography as a convict criminologist. Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit [Journal of Culture and Crime], 2020(3) pp. 80–96.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[https://www.bjutijdschriften.nl/tijdschrift/tcc/2020/3/TCC\\_2211-9507\\_2020\\_010\\_003\\_005](https://www.bjutijdschriften.nl/tijdschrift/tcc/2020/3/TCC_2211-9507_2020_010_003_005)

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](https://oro.open.ac.uk)

## ARTICLE

# Exploring narrative, convictions and autoethnography as a convict criminologist

Rod Earle

*‘The story of the master never wanted for narrators’*

*Frederick Douglass, 1892*

Convict Criminology is a relatively recent development in the ever-expanding horizons of criminology. It started in the USA in the 1990s, propelled in part by the extraordinary expansion and scale of US imprisonment. It took early inspiration and support from the work and presence of John Irwin. Irwin emerged from a five-year prison sentence for robbery in California in the 1960s to study criminology with Donald Cressey at UCLA. He was not impressed with the extant theorisation of prisoner cultures and socialisation that rested firmly on Gresham Sykes’ (1958) virtuoso account in *The Society of Captives*. Irwin compared this account with his own experience and found it wanting:

‘I was introduced to the sociology of the prison, particularly to some of the new theories about the inmate social system. I considered the theories, tested them against information that I could dig out of my memory, and discovered they did not fit. Extended discussions with Professor Cressey eventually led us to interview many ex-convicts and revise the current theories.’ (Irwin 1980: xxi)

Thus conceived is the project of convict criminology in a nutshell: how does direct, first-hand experience of imprisonment correspond with its theorisation and academic representation in criminology. In this case, it led to the development of a conceptual model of prisoners’ social relations, the importation model, which has become a, if not ‘the’, mainstay of theorising social relations among prisoners (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). In later life Irwin became progressively more candid about the relationship between his academic work and his prison experiences:

‘My prison experiences, five years at Soledad, a medium-security California prison, after several years of living the life of a thief and drug addict, as well as my post-prison years not only determined my academic career path but also shaped my sociological perspective in definite and profound ways.’ (Irwin 2005: ix).

Irwin, though his work largely preceded the formation of the American Convict Criminology group, is acknowledged as being a key figure in its development because of the way his biography, and specifically his time in prison, intersected with his contributions to criminology.

In this paper I explore the implications and possibilities of developing criminological perspectives from autobiographical vignettes that narrate lived experience of imprisonment. I argue that the peculiarities of prison as a central institution of the state and its vision of law and order and of men, make such experiences particularly relevant to criminology and criminologists. To be clear, though, I do not argue that lived experience provides necessarily or intrinsically 'better' forms of understanding, or that 'lived experience' exists in any unitary, essential form of knowledge about prison. The paper is a tentative contribution to the possibilities of extending and developing convict criminology through autobiographical narrative that draws from my own lived experience of imprisonment. I suggest that narrative forms of relating this experience, here in the form of vignettes, provides a way of exposing imprisonment to new forms of post-colonial analysis in which the voices of those subjected to coercive state power and violence are afforded more of a voice than they are in conventional criminological analysis (Coudry 2010).

### **On not having to imagine what it is like in prison**

There are some places where social structures and personal life intersect particularly powerfully. The more powerful the institution, the more strongly the intersection is experienced. Everyone has such experiences of schools, families, work, government and so on, and they are the lifeblood of sociology. In criminology the institutions we study are more concrete and identifiable, mostly because of the power they wield. They are the three C's of criminology: cops, courts and corrections. Prisons are institutions that fascinate social scientists and are often imagined sociologically as microcosms of society, societies-in-miniature and a convenient laboratory of human interaction (Sykes 1958). They exude a negative institutional charisma that attracts and repels in almost equal measure, whether you are a social scientist or an ordinary member of the public.

The implications of imprisonment are particularly powerful stimulants to a liberal imagination because they demarcate its boundaries in solid form – denial of liberty and the limits of personal freedom. These abstract implications rapidly become more concrete if you have been, or are, imprisoned yourself. The abstract becomes real and literally concrete (Altan 2019). If that transformation is part of your experience, there is work to be done as a criminologist to make them part of the story, part of your professional narrative. This is a choice that is easier or more straightforward for some criminologists than others depending on the nature of their conviction, their prison experiences and other biographical factors (Honeywell 2021).

Some convictions, such as those for drug offences, may have less heavily stigmatised or less pejorative and personally unsettling connotations. Convictions for

violence of various kinds may be more troublesome in the memory than theft or fraud, for example. Life after release from long-term imprisonment is undoubtedly very different from life after a short period in custody. A single experience of incarceration is different from a series of sentences. Sociologists also know that pre-existing structural determinants, such as class, race and gender, propel the life-course more surely than personal events. The very idea of convict criminology seems to condense these differences into a single unitary perspective, almost a master-narrative. I struggle with that reduction. I am uncomfortable comparing my single, short imprisonment to that of friends and colleagues, who have served many sentences and much longer ones. As an older academic I have the security of distance from 'crimes' that are themselves largely unburdened with shame or disgrace. I am protected from much of the prejudice that accompanies a criminal conviction by white middle-class capital. Criminologists without convictions should not underestimate the difficulties of disclosure, narration and academic incorporation. The familiar parameters of 'imposter syndrome' are doubled up and complicated; 'not smart enough to be an academic' meets 'not bad enough to be a convict'. 'Not good enough for the university' joins 'too bad for university'. For some the shadows of a troubled past and the fingers of suspicion linger longer and more darkly. It was only after conducting research in prisons and among incarcerated men that the coincidence of my experience (imprisonment) and the object of study (prisons) became a reality I could not honestly avoid (Earle 2016). I know that my subjective experience of being imprisoned conditions every book I read about prisons and a lot of the sociological literature I have come across since embarking on an academic career in my early forties. Aspects of the experience of arrests, prosecutions and criminal convictions bubble to the surface or lurk unexpectedly around various textual corners in the books I read. These are not completely exceptional experiences, but they are unusual and materially relevant to the subject matter of criminology. If doing convict criminology means adopting, from the techniques of post-colonial struggles, certain elements of 'strategic essentialism' and 'strategic exoticism'<sup>1</sup> that creatively and instrumentally invert the labels of the powerful, then so be it (Earle and Davies 2020). This re-possession of the label 'convict'/'criminal' should not imply an embrace of its qualities but be seen as a declaration of its positionalities in ways that are analogous to the ways 'Blackness' was taken up as a position in struggles against racism in the 1970s and 80s. It may be helpful to consider the point made by Edward Said that you don't have to be from the colonies to do post-colonial analysis, but you may find yourself invested in it rather differently if you are. As he put it 'an Indian or an African scholar of English literature will read *Kim*, say, or *Heart of Darkness* with a critical urgency not felt in quite the same way by an American or a British one' (Said 1993: 27). Chinua Achebe (1977) is the exemplary case in point because his piercing critique of Conrad's most famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, is all the more powerful for the way it refers to his own experience and biography. In a similar fashion, for the convict criminologists no reading of, say, *Discipline and Punish*

1 See Brouillette's (2011) discussion of Derek Walcott's self-conscious positional identity as poet of the Caribbean.

or *The Society of Captives* can be read without some degree of biographical reverberation. No visit to a prison for teaching or research, no lecture on the pains of imprisonment, is entirely free of personal memories and experience. We do not have to rely on our imagination in quite the same way as someone who has not been locked up in a prison for a crime.

However, as the biographical narrative form beckons as a vehicle for exploring the contact between the imagined and the experiential, the ambiguities, complexities and dilemmas of both become more apparent. This is familiar territory to the post-colonial scholar, but the 'strategic' aspect of owning or reclaiming an identity (e.g. 'Black', 'Convict') is rarely as coherent or as simple as one might hope (Earle 2019). It almost inevitably includes a 'vindicationist' impulse to generate a narrative of our personal lives as proof of their validity in the face of the denigrations and abjection that accompany the convict identity (see Alleyne 2015).

### **Rehabilitating penal narratives: post-colonial troubles**

For any criminologist who has emerged from criminal justice impacts and critical academic training, the narrative of rehabilitation looms large and threatening. Never much more than a travesty wrapped in a paradox, rehabilitation is always contingent, provisional and imaginary (Carlen 2008). As Melossi (2020) argues, ideas about rehabilitation are little more than an ideological cloak that dresses up the prison into something it is not designed to deliver. The rhetoric of rehabilitation is a cosmetic that simply prevents its more well-designed function from being recognised: the subordination of labour in the interest of capital. The personal encounter with this travesty that confronts you when you get sent to prison, the actual experience of being subjected to the machinery behind the cloak, is unsettling. The contrivance of the 'staging of the rehabilitation' (Melossi 2020) becomes obvious and undeniable as soon as you get locked up and encounter its passive aggression head-on. The bad faith involved is a kind of open betrayal of the liberal dream played out through each meaningless activity and every empty, overcrowded prison day. Melossi and Pavarini argue that for most of the last quarter of the 20th century the rigidly ordered regimes and crude authoritarianism of 'Western' prison life no longer even attempted to replicate the discipline of 19th century factory labour. Automation and the transfer of mass manufacturing to the East have laid that pantomime to rest, leaving 'Western' prisons with little alternative but to continue 'teaching the message of subordinate inclusion' (Melossi and Pavarini 2018: 15) through a less ideologically explicit neglectful containment.

For convict criminologists, our time inside a prison may have been served and done, but criminal justice is never completely done with you when disclosure of your criminal record is required at every national and professional boundary. Most of us will need a travel visa and many of our applications will be refused. Professional positions may be withdrawn. The myths of rehabilitation in criminal justice that comfort liberals are uncomfortable parts of our professional life,

inhibiting and complicating conference attendance, international travel and other conventions of academic life.

In this context, rehabilitation is the penal equivalent of neo-colonialism, offering devolved but continuing ‘control at a distance’; pervasively supervised self-discipline ad infinitum (McNeill 2019). The narrative labour begins in prison as the ‘convict’ is schooled by the language of rehabilitation and provided with the preferred tools of self-presentation to carry them across the prison walls. It is as if narrative labour has become the new form of prison labour rehearsing not so much the physical skills the prisoner will be required to perform for industry as the correctional story of the soul in their life to come (Warr 2019; Rose 1999).

Post-colonial literature offers many examples of the insights and interpretive leverage that are potentially available to a critical convict criminology that draws reflexively from direct experience of incarceration. One can be found in Edward Said’s (1993) discussion of the Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad’s identity. Said stresses how exile in England provided Conrad with particular affinities and experiences that shaped his narrative sensibilities and the kinds of stories he would tell. Said notes that even though Conrad’s migrant experiences were lodged way back in his biography, they afforded him ‘an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality’ (Said 1993: 77). They provided him with exceptional insights into the affective mechanics of Empire. In such a fashion the experience of imprisonment provides convict criminologists with similar well-springs of ‘exilic marginality’, an existential condition that imprisonment excels in delivering. Reading John Irwin’s (1980) description of the paradoxical ‘ragged edged vitality’ of prison life and the ‘stupefaction’ of doing time, I felt the quick spark of recognition. This phrasing captures some essential characteristic of men’s prison life with rare economy and precision that may be attributed to his own incarceration among men in prison.

Just as the history of European ethnography has shown how ethnographers tended to presume ‘the natives’ incapacity to intervene in the scientific discourse they developed around them, criminologists have, historically, tended to speak for, as well as of, the convict (Garland 1985; Sutherland 1931; 1932). Notwithstanding the recent proliferation of sensitive and insightful prison ethnographies (Crewe 2009; Ugelvik 2014; Phillips 2012; Drake et al. 2015) and that no-one is truly ‘indigenous’ to the prison, there are relatively few voices that can triangulate ethnographic immersion with personal experience of incarceration. In the penal context in which voluntary immersion in an involuntary condition is practically limited, convict criminology talks back with a discrepant voice. It can create opportunities for new narratives that may generate fresh ways of thinking about imprisonment (Aresti and Darke 2018).

Experiences of arrests, remand, trials, contested truths, convictions, incarceration and release are hardly remote from the currencies that criminology trades in. Historically, criminology has resorted to various forms of vicarious induction, perhaps the most notorious example being Edwin Sutherland’s controversial befriending of ‘a professional criminal’, Broadway Jones, to fashion a joint narrative of ‘a life in crime’ (Sutherland 1937; Snodgrass 1973). In the UK, Tony Parker’s co-production with a similar (criminal) figure, Robert Allerton (Parker

and Allerton 1962), is a sadly neglected attempt to share and theorise experience. It offers an academic voice to those usually spoken for, and against. When Allerton tells Parker 'I'll willingly gamble away a third of my life in prison, so long as I can live the way I want for another two-thirds', the academic is shocked by the autonomy of this assertion into a new form of inquiry that involves a weaving together of their two narratives, their lives become the story which becomes the criminology.

Why should this matter? The significance of discrepant narratives is to be found in Edward Said's (1993) famous comparison of the voluminous quantity of description produced by the French invading force that occupied Egypt in 1798, with the relatively modest, anguished accounts offered by indigenous Egyptians. While the French deployed the full weight of their imperial resources to produce a masterful account of various Egyptian contributions to world history, thereby signifying the scale of their victory and the extent of French superiority, Egyptian scholars at the time confined themselves to briefly cataloguing their pains, the indignity of the invasion and the horror of being conquered. The length and breadth of one set of narratives proclaimed the scale and might of the imperial triumph, the brevity of the other set of discrepant narratives, the humiliations of domination. The two narratives, insists Said, are not simply two sides of one story. One served to consolidate French imperial ambition, the other contained the seeds of anti-Western resistance that were to grow through the 19th and 20th centuries into anti-colonial struggles.

In the France of the early 1970s, Foucault identified criminology with the explicit disavowal of prison's broader political dimensions, the limited perception of its politically repressive function. He draws on an anecdote told to him by the formerly incarcerated French writer, Jean Genet, who recalled an episode in which an imprisoned communist agitator had once refused to be cuffed to him as he (Genet) 'was a common thief, a criminal' whereas the agitator was not – he was better than that. Genet says that after sensing the contempt with which this communist agitator regarded him, he could never again fully trust anyone with self-professed political affiliations. For Foucault it demonstrated the need to involve prisoners more closely in the process of understanding and critically analysing imprisonment – hence the establishment of Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP). Foucault's oeuvre speaks for itself, but his less well remembered prescription: 'The only way for prisoners to escape from this system of training is by collective action, political organisation, rebellion' (Foucault 1972) is worth recalling and if rebellion is not always practicable, writing most certainly is.

Convict criminology has the potential to generate original narratives from the margins of the discipline (Tietjen 2019). In this sense, convict criminology takes on the characteristics of a 'minor literature' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) constructed within the 'paper language' of conventional criminology. In the small number of criminologists who qualify as convict criminologists the narrator and the character are unusually combined; the criminologist and his/her criminal (cf. Garland 1985; Sutherland 1932) come with one voice. They can approach the traditional laboratory of criminology, as Sutherland (1931) described the prison, not as white coated scientists but inhabitants. As Deleuze and Guattari (1986) indi-

cate 'a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority construct within a major language'. Deleuze and Guattari discuss the example of Irish writers who can work against and within the conventions of the coloniser's language, English, while continuing to construct, in English, an argument against its impositions in Ireland that contest the logics of colonial control (see for example Friel 1981; Paulin 1985). Deleuze and Guattari's (1986: 1451) description of minor literature as 'a literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism' corresponds closely with the practice and ambition of convict criminology.

### **Taking the inside to the outside: reflexivity and autoethnographic vignettes**

Presenting autobiographical vignettes and generating short reflexive narratives are forms of non-fiction writing that have become a feature of some strands of critical race and whiteness studies (Ryden and Marshall 2012). They are certainly not exclusive to convict criminology, but they are relatively rare or unusual in mainstream criminology. Convict criminology is far from being a fully coherent sub-discipline or fundamentally separate from conventional or critical criminology, but there is a distinctive and distinguishing 'essence' to it: the experience of imprisonment. There is a place for this, but it should not be assumed that only those who have been imprisoned can know its truths. Convict criminology cannot rely on a facile naturalism that depends exclusively on experience and must demonstrate its own construction and sources, specific to the particulars of having been imprisoned. This can be accomplished by resorting to autoethnography and drawing on feminist epistemology, critical race theory and post-colonial scholarship. Experience and personal life are epistemologically important, as decades of feminist scholarship has insisted, but they are not just pools of pre-existing knowledge into which we can simply dip our cups and pour into our academic work: 'experience is never as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume it to be' (Fuss 1989: 114).

The intellectual dilemmas of developing a criminological narrative around personal encounters with the realities of imprisonment are intrinsic to the project of convict criminology. They are an exemplary archetype of the sociological dilemmas analysed by Robert Merton (1972) in which different kinds of knowledge are generated in research contexts by the relative positions of an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. Predictably and unavoidably prison sharpens these contrasting positions because it is predicated precisely on those two polarities – a prisoner is put inside something that everybody else is glad to be outside of – a prison. Being put inside a prison is to be taken outside society.

An autoethnographic approach involves communicating this subjective knowledge and investing in its particulars in order to locate our biographies in the abstract ideas, social structures and historical contexts we analyse as criminologists. Refining the techniques of convict criminology involves developing commitments to autoethnography (Tietjen 2019) and literally putting ourselves on the line. This means activating the three elements of the term: 'auto' refers to the



self, 'ethno' to the culture and 'graphy' to the writing. In bringing these together the intention is to generate better understandings of particular experiences and to elaborate their significance to a wider cultural context. Some autoethnographers (Grant et al. 2015; Grant 2019) generate vignettes to capture and convey the particularities of an experience. A vignette can be defined as 'a short piece of writing that expresses the typical characteristics of something or someone'. It is a kind of portraiture, a piece of writing that attempts to capture a snapshot of a larger picture and also tries to evoke some dimensions of that larger picture. Vignettes allude to a wider reality without necessarily specifying it.

In my book on convict criminology (Earle 2016) I start each chapter with a short autobiographical vignette based on some aspect of prison life as I remember it or because of its further consequences in my life and work. This provides the basis for an experiment in sociological autobiography along the lines recommended by Merton (1988: 18): 'a narrative text that purports to tell one's own history within the larger history of one's times'. It is an attempt to follow C. Wright Mills' (1959: 196) advice on the development of a sociological imagination: 'You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work.'

The formulation of experience we draw from as convict criminologists is frequently retrospective; it evolves *literally* through writing it out and involves the creation of coherence and narrative integrity that is intentional and purposeful rather than 'natural'. Producing a convict criminology narrative is a reflexive commitment that demonstrates how the 'particular subjectivities of authors are crucial and should be textually embodied rather than effaced' (Hesse 2003: 239). Reflexive narratives developed in this way and presented as convict criminology operate as counter-narratives to some of the positivist empiricism that historically characterise the dominant trends of European criminology (Van Swaaningen 1997).

The benefits of reflexivity are not always straightforward or easily accomplished. The pitfalls are many and easy to fall into (Lynch 2000; but see also Pels 2000). There is, for example, a trans-Atlantic tendency for neologisms, such as 'mystory' (as opposed to history) and 'Me-search' (rather than research), or 'I-witnessing' (rather than eyewitnessing) that can be irritating. Reflexivity can be little more than an epistemological cul-de-sac (Back 2012) of self-referential 'navel-gazing'. Heeding Geertz' (1988: 97) warnings about 'unbearably earnest' confessional writing can help convict criminologists avoid adding to this literature, but, as anyone who has tried it will know, it is a difficult balance to strike between recognising there is no 'view from nowhere' and that you are not the story, you are the storyteller. In convict criminology, you are both – the convict with the prison story and the criminologist with the academic telling.

Narratives involve the presentation of a story as a sequence or series of events, stories about what happened to someone, somewhere. In using vignettes my approach aligns with Coffey and Atkinson's (1996) preference for a loose analytical relationship between story and narrative where 'story' involves a person and a situation, and 'narrative' implies a wider sense of understanding a social reality.

The personal narratives that draw from our experiences of imprisonment and criminal justice are an essential component of convict criminology. The vignettes here are intended to shed light on how particular experiences of imprisonment might connect with sociological reflection and theorisation of prisons and punishment. They provide a textual mechanism to link personal experience to cultural analysis, offering the reader insights into the material encounters of imprisonment that form the basis of convict criminology (Newbold et al. 2014). As vignettes rather than extensive narratives, they offer fragments that can reflect the confusion and complexity of the original personal experience and the subsequent attempt to accommodate them within wider sociological objectives (Earle 2020). It is an approach that borrows heavily from feminist epistemologies that emphasise the connections between autobiographical narratives and sociological analysis (Personal Narratives Group 1989; Stanley 1993). These approaches insist on lived experience as politically and epistemologically consequential, but particularly and additionally so when they are subject to critical interpretation. This involves, to borrow some elegant phrasing from Ta-Nehisi Coates (2020: 14), weaving a path between ‘the warm quilt of memory and the cold library of fact’.

The vignettes presented below are followed by derivative speculations on their criminological consequences. The vignettes are narrative evidence of the experience that lies at the heart of convict criminology.

### **Vignette 1: Landings and ladders: HMP Norwich 1982**

My first time in prison I was aged 24 and had just been sentenced in a Crown Court in the town I had lived in for the last five years. I had expected to walk free from the court having been found not guilty, but had also been warned I faced five years or more if I was found guilty. The sentence of three months was laden with typically penal legal dilemmas. My useless barrister said it was ‘quite clever’. If I appealed against the sentence, I risked getting a longer one and was likely to remain in custody for several weeks while hearings were scheduled. He implied I might like to think myself lucky. He implied he had better things to do.

I didn’t feel lucky as I was taken though the series of doors from the prison reception building to the main prison. HMP Norwich is (still) a large local prison built in the middle of the 19th century in what is now regarded as classic prison design. The noise echoes off hard walls and doors, but it was the sight of the high hollow inside of the main building that struck me first. Metal stairs and railings and the strange wire netting slung between ‘landings’ along which men leaned over metal railings. A lot of metal. Something of a cage and barn.

Shown into my cell I was alone for a while. Just me, the metal bunk and the sparse furniture. And a bucket. With a lid. In the early evening I was joined by another reception prisoner. I dreaded this moment. The space of the cell to be shared. He was a white man considerably older than me, perhaps in his late 40s, chubby, bald and sweating. He and the officer letting him in seemed acquainted. ‘How long are you doing’ he asked. ‘Three months’ I said. ‘Fuck

me, I've done more than that in a panda car<sup>2</sup> he exclaimed with genuine derision. Having established I wasn't worth talking to much he proceeded to tuck himself into the lower bunk and seemed to spend several parts of the night wanking noisily while I wept silently.

Over the next few days, I started to learn the ways of the space created by the metal. Three landings extended up the height of the building and cell doors lined each length. At the end and in the middle a kind of gangway crossed the gap between the landings and metal stairs zigzagged down and up to connect the levels – 'the ones', 'the twos' and 'the threes' as they were called. At meal-times, and to access the exercise yard, the stairs had to be negotiated. It wasn't a big problem but involved being part of an unchosen line of traffic that might bring accidents or incidents. Exposure, vulnerability. And the realisation that the half-forgotten wariness of the school playground would be needed to negotiate moving between the formal, impersonal surface order of prison life, and like in a school, its underneath, personal orders.

### **Vignette 2: A Ring of Green Slime**

I had only been in prison one day. It was time to go out into the exercise yard and I was anxious because it was clearly a kind of informal, important and vaguely social occasion. The 'exercise yard'? It sounded like a prison cliché. As I emerged through the door into a high-walled compound, I could see the walking circle of prisoners forming, and couldn't quite believe my eyes. It was just like in the movies, except they weren't wearing striped uniforms, just shabby grey trousers and jumpers. Everyone was walking round and round in a circle, going nowhere, like the cliché. It seemed an unreal stereotype of meaninglessness. Like the zoo animals pacing around their cage. Prison life. Do I go with the flow, or what? I didn't know what else to do, so I wandered slowly toward the circulating straggle of men and fell into step. It was 1982. Memories drift and sift into place, patchy and incomplete, but one that has never left me is the sight of the awful ring of green slime that had formed on the inside of the circle from the men's accumulated gobbets of phlegm. A string of men walking slowly round and round in a circle, three times a day, and like some kind of human-formed seaweed on the tarmac, the accumulated expectorations of 200 men disfigured the exercise yard with passively malign intent. Prison. Men. All in it together.

### **Vignette 3: A workshop**

The prison workshop is an icon of incarceration at once familiar, and yet precisely not for most people. For the first couple of weeks at HMP Norwich I'm allocated to the 'paper' workshop. On rows of wooden benches are piles of thin cardboard. My job is to paste a paper strip down the folding spine of a large beige folder. I pass the strip through a metal glue roller and lay it down on the fold. The pile of folders is replenished by the prisoner on my right who has fed the flat cardboard through a folding machine. I put the reinforced

2 A reference to the black and white paintwork of police cars.

folder on the pile to my left where a guy glues a small card envelope to it and passes it onto another pile, for further assemblages. Hours pass.

In the workshop, there is the slap and crack of card whirring through folding machines, the smell and dust of wrapped stacks of card. Small talk, chat and the shifting postures of semi-idle men. Weakly inevitable banter trickles through the boredom. It's self-evidently dull, repetitive work; an archetype but basic factory production line. In the hierarchy of the prison workshops at HMP Norwich, it is pretty much at ground-floor level in terms of prison wages and esteem.

A few weeks pass. In another part of the workshop, I discover piles of completed, fully assembled folders. They carry the stamp of the Dept. of Health and Social Security, and I recognise them as being almost identical to the folders glimpsed and checked at the signing-on desk I reported to in Norwich to claim my 'social security' payments while I pretended to look for a future in work. The folders in the prison workshop are, according to another stamp, destined for the Belfast office. This small, local prison has a colonial reach. Its prison labour loosely connects it to the British administration of territories across the Irish Sea. The workshop is a small eddy in the currents of industrial modernisation that swell through post-war Britain. In the late 1960s, a handful of central government administrations were moved out of London, and Norwich became the headquarters of Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO). It brought some jobs to the city, and the prison.

Moving to a new cell brings new cellmates, and I get some friendly advice: 'You're a printer? You should come and work with us in the bookbinding workshop. Tell them and they'll move you – its better pay and we have a laugh.' He's right. The workshop has a better atmosphere. The smell of glue is stronger. The ambience of labour is lighter because it is skilled work. Books for the prison library are brought in and the paperback binding carefully dismantled so the book can be reassembled with longer-lasting, more durable hard covers. There is care and craft in the labour, even some pride as value is added to the books. Boards are cut to size and covered with a coloured 'cloth' finish before the original cover, spine and paperback are carefully pasted onto the new, more enduring, hardback book. The work requires dexterity and special tools. It is skilled work. I have some experience of the process from my print training, but recall my tutor was dismissive – bookbinding by hand was a small, vestigial cottage industry – a relic of the past, not the future of work. Most books sent into prison stay in prison, but some are recognised as personal possessions. My one remaining souvenir from HMP Norwich is my rebound copy of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, signed inside the new cover, discreetly, by my friendly cellmate – 'Chris from Blackburn'. He was amused by the title. A gift. Prison crafted treasure. A memory not to be lost.

## Speculations on a narrative for convict criminology

One of my abiding impressions from being sent to HMP Norwich was the overbearing and exclusive 'maleness' of the prison experience. Some twenty-five years later I was surprised to find women officers at the men's prisons where I conducted research in 2006-8, but less surprised that notwithstanding their presence, the place was still quintessentially 'male'. The uniforms of officers proclaim the martial, semi-militarised preferences of masculine authority, those of the inmates the shabby school uniforms of subordinated conformity. Researching prisons in 2006-8 the same dichotomy in the respective uniforms of officers and inmates told me little had changed in the time that had passed between me being a prisoner and now researching prisoners. This double exposure to prison that comes with convict criminology, the two reference points of personal experience and research perspective, kept recurring. For example, on the early visits to the prison where I looked for opportunities to interact with the men in the exercise yard, the memories trickled back. Still the same straggle of circling men walking round and round, but no ring of green slime this time. The men I saw in the exercise yard connected to my own experience earlier in Norwich and prompted a reflection of 'being all in it together'; in men's prisons there is a sense of passive, vaguely malign, reluctant male fellowship.

Prisons tend to 'see' men as the state sees men, the way Thomas Hobbes saw men: 'as if but now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come into full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other' (Hobbes, cited in Sarasohn 2000: 615). This vision of the modernist monad, 'man' as an atomistic particle, each self-contained and notionally independent, rather than a co-relational creature formed through a web of interdependencies, is far from inconsequential. As Sartre (1956) argues in *Being and Nothingness* 'the look' is central to a person's sense of being and is experienced as a form of possession. The panoptical features of imprisonment are not so much the pervasive surveillance of behaviour as the constitution by the state of its preferred other – an individual man 'without all kind of engagement to each other' (Hobbes, *ibid*).

The abstract relations which social theorists argue about and analyse are often keenly felt in prison. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, suggests that 'penal practice may serve as a laboratory where tendencies attenuated and adulterated elsewhere can be observed in their pure form; after all, control and order are the outspoken objectives of the prison system' (Bauman 1993: 122). Similarly, Loïc Wacquant (2002: 386) suggests that we recognise the prison as a 'template or vector of broader social forces, political nexi, and cultural processes that traverse its walls'. These perspectives suggest that prisons provide evidence of social processes otherwise obscured, possibilities impending but unseen. Who better than convict criminologists who have been 'inside the beast' to consider and present that evidence, not just of prison but the lifeworld it seeks to reproduce, the lives it seeks to negate and the social vision it projects and constructs?

Being withdrawn from the stream of life, the prisoner is presented with a particularly Protestant sense of having a duty to 'make a life' and to account for it henceforth and for evermore. A conviction may be served for a fixed term in

prison, but it casts a long shadow in the form of a criminal record registered in the machinery of government. It leaves marks elsewhere as well. An actuarial sensibility insinuates itself into a prisoner's experience of life. Issues of performance and assessment are pervasive. Questions of freedom that are invisible and irrelevant to most people most of the time, become a transactional reality negotiated on a daily, sometimes hourly basis in prison. The door is locked, the wing is closed, the time is not right, you cannot go there. You need permission. You need to ask. You have to fill in an application. And on it goes. I have heard long-term prisoners talking about the dread realisation, as they near the end of their sentence and move to open conditions, of the extent of their institutionalisation and social incapacitation (see Mickelthwaite with Earle, forthcoming in 2021).

The natural passing of time that buoys a life along its course is diverted by imprisonment into a particular kind of culvert away from the mainstream. Rather than a life coursing through time one finds oneself in a stagnant life-cul-de-sac. Prison time is time lived without its flow (Riley 2019). A narrative must be composed to bring back momentum and trajectory to a life stilled by the enclosure of imprisonment. The familiar features of the real world, its actions, structures, symbols, movements, sounds and temporality are not those of the prison world. Without venturing too far into Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative and time, it is important nonetheless to appreciate the profound dislocations of imprisonment, and indeed, their intentionality. If you have experienced the sluggish, soporific drag of imprisonment, I think that appreciation comes a little quicker than otherwise. You do not so much have to read Ricoeur's *Narrative and Time* or Heidegger's *Being and Time* (punishment enough, surely), as encounter them in prison's drowsy numbness (Stiegler 2008). A prison sentence is most definitely a 'being-within-time' and a 'reckoning with time' out of which meanings must be drawn, a narrative developed. The extraordinary lightness of everyday being is reformulated in prison through 'depth', 'tightness' and 'weight' (Crewe 2009). Placed outside of society, one is made aware of society. Placed outside the usual rhythms of time, one feels time. Just as a fish will not find the seawater wet, so the prisoner is made to feel what should not be felt – being out of time. In this ontological capacity convict criminology has some of the critical potentials Foucault (1988: 82) identified in 'subjugated knowledges': '(...) knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located low down in the hierarchy, beneath the required level of scientificity'.

### **Beware of orientalist narratives lurking with intent**

The criminologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are proliferating and increasingly promiscuous in the partnerships they seek. Convict criminology is the name given to the assemblage of experiences and analyses of prison and criminal justice that criminologists who have been (or are) imprisoned produce (Tietjen 2019). In the emerging field of narrative criminology there is a corresponding 'profusion of discoveries' (Fleetwood et al. 2019) that are testimony to the vitality of scholarship

around questions of crime and the open boundaries of criminology. In both convict and narrative criminology, the momentum is building toward a vision of the future for this scholarship (Fleetwood et al. 2019; Tietjen 2019; Ross and Vianelli 2020). For convict criminology narrative approaches draw from a reflexivity that explicitly acknowledges the positionality of the scholar and the importance of autobiographical narrative. Our stories of, and personal involvement in, some of society's most powerful institutions, its two factories of 'good' and 'bad' character, are necessarily relevant and heavily loaded with sociological significance. Traditionally, a university degree offers uplift and inclusion while a criminal conviction locks you down and out. Prisons operate at the base of the social hierarchy, universities at the top, and the gift of convict criminology is to ensure they are not entirely innocent of these positions by combining them.

The 'Western prison', notwithstanding the diversity of form and function that gathers uncomfortably under that label, is a peculiar cocktail of correctional, missionary zeal and barbarous, colonial brutality. It is a powerful concoction. The fashioning of narratives equal to it must contend with the social distance between the people inhabiting them and the people who write about them. Wacquant (2001) talks eloquently of the deadly symbiosis that develops when 'ghetto and prison meet and mesh' in the functional reproduction of social and racial hierarchies. Convict criminology must avoid the fantasy of a healthy symbiosis between criminology departments and prison education facilities (Earle and Mehigan 2019). It can perhaps develop a kind of reverse parasitism in which the fortunes of the criminology grow only as those of the prison wane. Unfortunately, most of the history of criminology suggests otherwise (Garland 1985). There is growing evidence of symbiosis as university criminology departments in the UK and the USA accommodate themselves to the needs of imprisonment more than the need for less prisons (Earle and Mehigan 2019). While prison systems continue to grow and to 'strike at the bottom of society' (Mathiesen 1990: 70), convict criminologists should be wary of adding their weight to that capacity.

There is the risk of the fetishization of experience both within convict criminology and of convict criminologists by conventional criminologists (Warr 2021). This may follow the path of orientalism, essentialising experiences and identities to narrowly instrumental and conservative visions. 'Orientalist', it should be remembered, was a term coined by sceptical British administrators to identify the minority of 'well-meaning' but 'deluded' British officials serving in colonial India who became overly sympathetic to the local cultures of the 'natives'. They had even started to translate Indian religious texts into English! Edward Said (1978) refashioned the term to argue that this sympathy and interest was dangerously misunderstood and far from being a challenge to colonial power, operated as a form of validation based on the simplistic romanticisation of an idealised culture. The original orientalists had crudely misrepresented complex and conflicted cultures as simple harmonious entities in a way that was at best patronising and at worst racist. As Said points out, orientalist perspectives tend to serve and reinforce imperial power rather than challenge it. In Palestine, for example, during the British administered Mandate, many British officials idealised the 'real Arabs' of the Bedouin tribes (a minority in Palestine) at the expense of the (majority)

urban Palestinian workers, many of whom were organising in the cities against British rule.

To avoid becoming complicit in penal expansion and the reproduction of more rehabilitative delusions about prison, convict criminology needs to draw from the insights of post-colonial studies. Narratives of lived experience are critical to resisting the negations of collective life and the denial of a future-in-common that accompany the ascendancy of neo-liberal racial capitalism (Couldry 2010; Virdee 2019). The narrative voice implicit to convict criminology can make links with the larger transformative politics of the post-colony (Mbembe 2001) giving rise to post-prison narratives that are less instrumental to prison growth and more liberating of the soul and the subject. We can recall the words of an intellectual who survived, but was destroyed by, imprisonment: 'It is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought' (Wilde 1990: 1018)

## Bibliography

- Achebe, C. (1977). An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp. 1781-1794. New York: Norton 2001.
- Alleyne, B. (2015). *Narrative Networks: Storied Approaches in a Digital Age*. London: Sage.
- Altan, A. (2019). *I will Never See The World Again*. London: Granta.
- Aresti, A. & Darke, S. (eds.) (2018). Special Edition of Prisoners on Prison: Twenty Years of Convict Criminology. *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* 27(2).
- Back, L. (2012). Take Your Reader There. In: *Writers on Writing*. Durham University, [www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/lesback/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/lesback/) Accessed 22/07/13.
- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brouillette, S. (2011). *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Carlen, P. (ed.) (2008). *Imaginary Penalties*. Cullompton: Willan.
- Coates, T. (2020). *The Water Dancer*. London: Random House, Penguin.
- Coffey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary research strategies*. London: Sage.
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after neoliberalism*. London: Routledge.
- Crewe, B. (2009). *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1986) Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. In: *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp. 1781-1794. New York: Norton 2001.
- Douglass, F. (1892). *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Drake, D., Earle, R. & Sloan, J. (eds.) (2015) *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Earle, R. (2016). *Convict criminology: Inside and out*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Earle, R. (2018). Convict criminology in England: Developments and dilemmas. *British Journal of Criminology*, 58(6), 1499-1516.
- Earle, R. (2019). Narrative convictions, conviction narratives: The prospects of convict criminology. In: J. Fleetwood, L. Presser, S. Sandberg & T. Ugelvik (eds.), *The Emerald Handbook of Narrative Criminology*, pp. 63-83. Bingley: Emerald.



- Earle, R. (2020). Doing Time for Convict Criminology. In: J. Ross & F. Vianelli (eds.) *Convict Criminology for the Future*. London: Routledge.
- Earle, R. & Davies, W. (2020). Glimpses across 50 years of Prison Life from members of British Convict Criminology. *Prison Service Journal*, 250 – Summer 2020, pp. 13-19.
- Fleetwood, J., Presser, L., Sandberg S. & Ugelvik, T. (eds.) (2019). *The Emerald Handbook of Narrative Criminology*, pp. 63-83. Bingley: Emerald.
- Foucault, M. (1972). Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview (John K. Simon). *Social Justice*, Vol. 18:3.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Power Knowledge: Selected interviews and Other Writing*. New York: Random House.
- Friel, B. (1981). *Translations*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Fuss, D. (1989). *Essentially speaking: Feminism, nature and difference*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Garland, D. (1985). The criminal and his science. *British Journal of Criminology*, 25(2), 109-137.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Grant, A. (2019). Dare to be a wolf: Embracing autoethnography in nurse educational research. *Nurse Education Today*, 82, 88-92.
- Grant, A., Leigh-Phippard, H. & Short, N. P. (2015). Re-storying narrative identity: A dialogical study of mental health recovery and survival. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 22(4), 278-286.
- Hesse, D. (2003). The Place of Creative Non-fiction. *College English* 65:3 237-241.
- Honeywell, D. (2021). *Ambiguities of Desistance – Ex-prisoners experiences of higher education*. London: Emerald.
- Irwin, J. (1980). *Prisons in Turmoil*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Lynch, M. (2000). Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of privileged Knowledge, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 17:3, 26-54.
- Mathiesen, T. (1990). *Prison on trial: A critical assessment*. London: Sage.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Post-Colony*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- McNeill, F. (2019). *Pervasive Punishment: Making Sense of Mass Supervision*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Melossi, D. & Pavarini, M. (1981/2018). *The prison and the factory: The origins of the penitentiary system*. London: Macmillan.
- Melossi, D. (2020). The Prison and The Factory 40 Years On: Looking to the Future, *British Journal of Criminology* 60:4.
- Merton, R. (1988). Some thoughts on the concept of sociological autobiography. In: M. White Riley (ed.) *Sociological Lives*. London: George, Allen and Unwin.
- Mickelthwaite D. (with Earle) (2021). From Closed to Open: An Autoethnographic Account from a Life-Sentenced Prisoner. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* (under review).
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Newbold, G., Ross, J., Richards, S., Jones, S. & Lenza, M. (2014). Prison Research From the Inside: The Role of Convict Autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20(4) 439-448.
- Orwell, G. (1940). *Inside the Whale and other Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Parker, T. & Allerton, R. (1962). *The Courage of His Convictions*, London: The Quality Book Club.
- Paulin, T. (1985). *Ireland and the English Crisis*, London: Bloodaxe Books.
- Pels, D. (2000). Reflexivity: One step Up, *Theory Culture and Society*, Vol. 17:3, 1-25.

- Personal Narratives Group (1989). *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist theory and Personal Narratives*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Phillips, C. (2012). *The Multicultural Prison: Ethnicity, Masculinity and Social Relations among Prisoners*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, S. & Ross, J. (2001). Introducing the New School of Convict Criminology, *Social Justice* 28(1) 177-190.
- Riley, D. (2019) *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*. London. Picador.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Governing the Soul*, London: Free Association Books.
- Ross, J. & Vianelli, F. (eds.) (2020). *Convict Criminology for the Future*. London: Routledge.
- Ryden, W. & Marshall, I. (2012). *Reading, writing and the rhetorics of whiteness*, London: Routledge.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Vintage.
- Said, E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windhus.
- Sarasohn, L. T. (2000). Was Leviathan a Patronage Artifact? *History of Political Thought*, Vol. XXI No. 4.
- Stanley, L. (1993). On Auto/Biography in Sociology. *Sociology* 27(1) 41-52.
- Stiegler, B. (2008). *Acting Out*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tietjen, G. (2019). Convict criminology: Learning from the past, confronting the present, expanding the future. *Critical Criminology* 27:101-114.
- Ugelvik, T. (2014). *Power and Resistance in Prison: Doing Time, Doing Freedom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Swaaningen, R. (1997). *Critical Criminology: Visions from Europe*. London: Sage.
- Virdee, S. (2019). *Racism, Class and the racialised Outsider*. London: Springer.
- Wacquant, L. (2001). Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh. *Punishment and Society*, Vol. 3 (1) 95-133.
- Wacquant, L. (2002). The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration. *Ethnography* 3(4) 371-398.
- Warr, J. (2019). "Always gotta be two mans": Lifers, risk, rehabilitation and narrative labour, *Punishment and Society*, Vol. 22(1) 28-47.
- Warr, J. (2021, forthcoming) 'Many Rivers to Cross: Why I' not a Convict Criminologist', *American Society of Criminology Convict Criminology annual newsletter*.
- Wilde, O. (1990). *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Blitz Editions.