

Verses Witness

Reimagining Carceral Spaces through Poetry

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While prisons are among the most prominent architectonic structures in modern history and the contemporary justice system, they remain among the most concealed and cryptic spaces of our time. In recent decades, penal architecture has gained renewed attention in geography, criminal sociology and the arts due to the exponential growth of incarceration rates worldwide, spotlighting the inhumane conditions faced by prisoners.¹ However, prison space itself is still highly inscrutable and unmonitorable to ‘free’ citizens, including human rights activists, policymakers and even those who design these spaces.² This means first-hand accounts by incarcerated people are still the most impactful sources to depict the complexity of such spaces, especially those communicating in literary forms that tend to reach a wider audience. Many historically renowned and formerly imprisoned figures wrote prose and poems to externalize their insights and struggles within such a confined time and space, delineating the traces of the carceral environment inscribed on their bodies.³ Their words shed light on the materiality and spatiality of imprisonment, serving as transversal storytelling and bearing witness across generations and geographies.

From this collection of narratives, I focus in this article on prison poetry in particular, examining its intricate relationship with carceral architecture to understand how such spaces are perceived and produced. In doing so, I take a closer look at the Canadian poet Bradley Peters’s 2023 debut poetry book, *Sonnets from a Cell*, as a case study.⁴ Through his verses, I aim to demonstrate how poems penned by prisoners provide a unique avenue for understanding the sociospatial dynamics of incarceration, as well as its physical, psychological and emotional impacts on individuals. By delving into the nuances of his poetic expressions and probing ‘how architecture is shaped by words, images and ideas long before it is transformed into bricks and mortar’,⁵ I also reflect on how disciplined, controlled and penalized bodies perceive and navigate the confines of such spaces. From a more forward-looking perspective, this is also an exercise of pondering the potentiality for such poems to act as a resource for rethinking carceral architecture in society. In this way, they might reassess and counteract the harsh material realities and dehumanizing experiences that are

reiterated through new reformist prison designs.⁶ Guided by prison abolitionism, this exercise envisions – even in a utopian way – designed spaces that recognize, mitigate and eventually put an end to the brutality of incarceration.

On the Complex Production of Carceral Space

Why prisons now? David Scott, in his edited volume responds to this question, foregrounding that ‘rates of penal incarceration in many countries around the world have reached record levels’, driven by the incessant rates of race-, class- and gender-based discrimination.⁷ While critiques of mass incarceration, posed by penologists, social scientists and activists, stress the irrefutable dysfunctionality of prisons and criminal justice systems at large, in recent years yet another constituent of prisons, space, has been brought forward.⁸ Carceral geography, for instance, a relatively new ‘field of geographical research into practices of incarceration’, examines the spatial dynamics of imprisonment and the experiences of confinement, and their link to increasingly punitive states.⁹ Some architectural studies, albeit few, also identify the issues involved in the design of prison spaces, particularly in urban contexts, highlighting the entangled links between the design industry, neoliberal capitalism and state apparatuses, which entails the constant flow of bodies through the nodes of criminal justice system, driven by the creation of new crimes and criminals to fill these spaces.¹⁰

In the meantime, how these spaces, designed to deprive someone of liberty through punishment and control, affect their dwellers and get affected in return begs for further exploration. If we follow the contemporary theories of spatiality concurring that space is not a passive receiver of human conduct but an active participant in social and personal practices, we can also extrapolate that ‘the configuration of penal space is . . . a determinate factor in shaping prisoners’ social relations’.¹¹ But how to, then, approach prison space; one of the most repressive and rigid sites of power where the body is strictly disciplined?¹² How can we unfold its complex sociospatial conditions? While modern penal reforms have recurrently made substantial alterations in the typologies and regulations of such institutions, this only led to the construction of more prisons and the consolidation of retributive justice.¹³ Today, most prisons built on the outskirts of urban areas function as cities in their own right. Moreover, these far-flung but networked archipelagos are scattered across remote zones and continents, deemed almost ‘invisible’ to the ‘free’ world.¹⁴ This fact, despite the studies coming from on-the-ground research and second sources that challenge many erroneous beliefs about prisons, leaves the ‘outsiders’ even more detached from the prison(er) experience, with fallacious assumptions about criminality and the carceral space.¹⁵

For instance, prisons, often seen as spatially ‘fixed’ and impenetrable institutions, are in reality sites of constant flux, with a continuous flow of prisoners, social workers, visitors, goods, health supplies, food and material resources.¹⁶ Rachel Ellis describes this as ‘institutional infusion’, making prisons rather ‘porous’ spaces where the social, material and emotional dynamics are more volatile than assumed, and what is inside is constantly mingled with what is outside.¹⁷ Also, although seemingly a

prison is designed to be harsh, monotonous and impersonal environment that rarely allows customization, there is the undeniable agency and interference of prisoners who strive to personalize the prison space by employing personal objects and rituals. Such spatial modifications – turning prison spaces into quasi-homes, workplaces or third spaces – not only foster ‘the [re]construction of the meaning of prison spaces’ but also blur the line between the private and the public.¹⁸ Prison is full of purported ‘private’ spaces (cells, washrooms, etcetera) that are regularly monitored, intruded upon and shared, and public spaces (such as workshops and prayer rooms) used as intimate refuges by prisoners in an attempt to escape the omnipresent gaze of authority.¹⁹ Moreover, besides the disposition of ‘the cellular, standardized, and linear nature of the wings’ vis-à-vis ‘more open, circular and intimate arrangement’ of communal areas, there are also other spaces where the prison rules are ‘partially or temporarily suspended, permitting a broader emotional register’.²⁰ Moran calls them ‘liminal spaces’ – such as visiting rooms – which complicate the boundaries between ‘outside(r)’ and ‘inside(r)’ and, thereby, the social production of punitive space through varying levels of mobility, ‘intimacy, and physical contact’ between prisoners and their beloved ones, depending on the prison’s spatial settings.²¹ This need for prison spaces to ‘maintain public or quasi-public façades’ renders them even more composite, providing various ‘spatially differentiated emotional domains’ all at once that create unique ‘internal geographies of behaviour and emotional expression’ and eventually spatial configurations of sociability, privacy and safety.²²

Our understanding of these complexities is still limited, due to the inaccessibility of prisons, reinforced further by technical and governmental restrictions, as well as methodological challenges that often create ‘unequal power relations between interviewer and respondent’ within prisons.²³ This makes first-hand accounts from within even more necessary and relevant. I thereby argue that prison writing, especially poetry, in its unique ‘architextural’ form, is a significant medium for rendering prisons even more porous, leaking spatial and corporeal information through the walls of penal institutions to the outside world. This porosity allows prison poems, such as those by Bradley Peters that I explore below, to map the emotional geography of prisons and help us reimagine the materiality of justice systems.

On Prison Poetics and Spatio-Emotional Narratives of Incarceration

Prison writing has been a vital form of literary resistance across various times, cultures and geographies.²⁴ As a distinct genre, Prison Literature, materialized in the form of fiction and non-fiction from letters, prayers, memoirs and novels to poetry, encompasses works produced both by incarcerated literary figures and by those who begin writing in prison to cope with the hardship of seclusion and to portray the intricacies of confinement.²⁵ This deeply situated form of writing captures the personal, historical, physical, emotional and mental conditions of prison life, serving as both survival and resistance.²⁶ Although the genre is far from monolithic, thematically ‘the problem of unstructured time, the agony of solitude, disintegration of the self, and suicidal urges’ occur as ‘common [but not

sole] denominators' depicted literally or figuratively.²⁷ Also, the gruelling experience of deprivation of freedom leads many writers to foreground resilience and hope, both as a self-expression and externalization of pain, and a vocation to highlight the shared experience of being captive.²⁸ Prison writing reveals truths about not only personal or group experiences but also the all-encompassing machine of the carceral system, prompted by policing, surveillance, disenfranchisement, impoverishing, racial and class stratification, and eventually state violence.²⁹ As Larson puts it, such writing, 'responding to the sovereignty of the punishment apparatus . . . is at once indexical of the precise conditions in which it is created, and susceptible to a global tropology', which widely informs and shapes, what he calls, 'prison poetics'.³⁰

What makes poetry particularly influential in prison literature is its distinctive concentrated form, economy of words and evocative imagery, which encourages candour and conveys the intensity of imprisonment in ways other literary forms often cannot.³¹ Its fragmented structure can mirror the disorientation and restriction of prison spaces, with line breaks, rhymes, rhythm and enjambment evoking the sense of confinement and disruption. While prose provides detailed and linear descriptions, poetry's condensed use of metaphor and symbolic immediacy can depict prison spaces as 'fortresses' or 'labyrinths', blending physical and psychological entrapment to convey both the literal and figurative impact of confinement. If, as Rashad Shabazz argues, 'writing from prison is also a *spatial act*', and if prisoners alter the space of prison 'through transcending the bars and repurposing prison space' by writing, prison poets are 'architects', as he proposes, in designing '*counter-carceral*' poetic spaces.³²

Moreover, through poems we gain aesthetic and authentic testimonies of prison life through the prisoner's lens, sometimes detailing daily routines, inner journeys and inhumane administrative procedures.³³ In these delineations, space and material conditions constitute a crucial element, as they are one of the most immediate, tangible and omnipresent facets of confinement that shape both the content and structure of prison writing.³⁴ Walls, doors and bars are particularly prevalent in these depictions, symbolizing both prisoners' isolation and their emotional barriers with themselves, guards, other prisoners and their loved ones.³⁵ As mentioned earlier, despite structural reforms over the last two centuries, most material conditions of prisons persist, as demonstrated by poems written by prisoners hailing from different times and geographies. From renowned Irish playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and Turkish political poet Nâzım Hikmet Ran (1902-1963) to Moroccan Marxist feminist Saida Menebhi (1952-1977) and Russian Soviet dissident Irina Ratushinskaya (1954-2017), and from contemporary poets such as American legal scholar Reginald Dwayne Betts (b. 1980) to currently detained public figures including Indian activist G.N. Saibaba (b. 1967) and Iranian educator Mahvash Sabet (b. 1953), all these verse-makers have passed down diverse fragments of a broader carceral narrative.³⁶

Amid the whole corpus of prison poetry, Bradley Peters' *Sonnets from a Cell* stands out in terms of unveiling multifarious institutional, personal, spatio-material, sociopolitical, affective and economic aspects of

carcerality in an unapologetically candid and meticulous way, unveiling the coercive and punitive state mechanisms. Following a quasi-linear narrative structure that delineates the before, during and aftermath of imprisonment, the collection is distributed into seven parts based on the seven stages of psychological adaptation to institutionalization – from alienation and severe isolation to post-traumatic stress, reflecting different facets of the carceral continuum.³⁷ Each poem begins with a literary or academic epigraph, adding external context to Peters’s introspective reflections.

As to spatiality, in *Sonnets from a Cell*, like in many other prison poems, the predominant atmosphere is conditioned by the overwhelming presence of the prison cell and the ‘concrete and steel, bordered by formidable barriers – stone walls, electrified fences, bales of concertina wire – that are punctuated by imposing guard towers’ and other surveillance bodies.³⁸ These material aspects are portrayed alongside other intense sensory elements, such as light, sound, temperature and smell, through either their intense presence or perilous absence, continuously mediating between danger and survival. Peters verbalizes them frequently with wordings such as ‘Loudspeaker buzz really a lawn mower / ... ‘Lights-out is called.’³⁹ Or ‘.. the same room, exact same indigo / Cage lights. / ... They flicker, exhale cold air, they vibrate / ... Concrete altars. What light!’⁴⁰ In ‘Getting Netted Up’, Peters vents about their persistence

Cage lights on bright white walls buzzing all night
Are such fanatic hosts. I try to sleep
While they glow above me. It’s too much glee.
It’s too much beaming when I do push-ups.
...
I squat on the steel shitter. They don’t blink.
...
The cage lights want to chat but I’m dead tired!⁴¹

These sensations become even more intensified in solitary confinement – a.k.a. ‘hole’ or ‘box’, which is one of the most inhumane forms of punishment, often leading to long-term mental and physical damage to the prisoner’s body. In ‘A Visit to the Box’, Peters recounts its deranging effects rather strikingly:

The real room is inside another room.
Its steel door snaps shut like a mouth. It reeks
Of bleach. The room with no windows is scrubbed
Skull white. I am a tongue stuck in its jaw.
...
... It dilates
Into one rage box. The room moves through me.⁴²

Both his ‘After My Daily Twenty-Minute Shower Break’ and his ‘The Day My Hair Starts to Fall out in Clumps’ that appears below refer to the psychosomatic effects of being sequestered in such a cruel space:

Sleepless but this is a private restroom—
 Steel toilets upstream clear their throats all night—
 At forty days the cage light is a mouth—
 A feast of jabs naked door-kick madness—
 ...
 One dead-tired inmate melts into a shriek—
 ...
 Cell doors fold into formative symbols— ⁴³

Apart from these isolated spaces, Peters also provides insights into social spaces within the prison – mental health wards, dining areas, bathrooms and yards – in a casual yet descriptive manner. He depicts these areas as fraught with tension and violence, yet marked by spontaneous interactions between prisoners, and between prisoners and officers. Through a ‘camera-like’ lens, ‘Postcards from inside the Machine’ vividly captures these dynamics, allowing readers to visualize various settings and the interplay of characters within and with them – such as those in the dining area casually ‘watch[ing] the dead man’, referring to a young boy, ‘walk across the unit and smile / at each table with his meal tray / like it’s the first day of school’.⁴⁴

Also, we get a glimpse of the constant tension in common areas, by reading, for instance, how after corrections officers (COs) ‘unload two cans of mace on everyone’, the protagonist falls off his chair, shields himself and later returns to his cell unscathed while ‘bodies shift in the show hall’.⁴⁵ In another poem, he approaches a prisoner’s cell on the ‘third-last down the tier’ at night, passing through the open doorways which radiate ‘Indigo and TV babble and inmates / shift in the half-light’.⁴⁶ In these shared places, there are unwritten rules, gestures, routines and banalities, as seen, for instance, in ‘Learning How to Jail’ where Peters elucidates: ‘This pay phone, that chow line. Don’t watch / convicts / Pack suitcases, sharpen shivs in the yard. / ... Jumpsuits: / Part pillow, part sleep mask. When night falls, wait / Two hours. The cinderblock walls sweat.’⁴⁷ Or depicted painstakingly in ‘Hard Time’:

In the hush all their hearts patter like rain.
 Or is that the clock that towers above
 The chow hall? Its face behind a red flare
 Ignites the polished floor. Men avoid it.
 They scamper like ants around its bright beam.
 ...
 It brings dudes to your cell before discharge
 For a send-off, guards, mace, brings you to seg
 Where there’s new clocks: meal carts, deadbolts,
 wash breaks. ⁴⁸

Also, while poems like ‘Daydreaming in the Shower before Lights-Out’ show how public spaces can offer a semblance of refuge for contemplation, as mentioned earlier, others like ‘Ding-Wing’ – which describes the mental health ward – illustrate how others’ experiences can intrude upon one’s private space:

The moans. The high-pitched screams. One man
wailing

...

The mindless hours I lie on my steel bunk
With no pillow staring at the blue bulb
In the cinder block room, a young poet

...

Psych camp. Red tag. Sleep on steel. Turtle suit.
Under watch ...⁴⁹

This restlessness, paradoxically, also lies in the overpowering sameness and depersonalization enforced by prison (such as bare architecture, uniform clothing and strict no-cell-decorations policies) which aim to erase any individual expression and turn prisoners into a monolithic entity.⁵⁰ However, the deprivation of resources and the prison's back-breaking economics lead people to find alternative material solutions, as Peters illustrates. In his poems, the protagonist sometimes uses 'magazines chest-strapped for body armour' and grips his 'pen like a shiv' to protect himself, and sometimes 'brews pruno [prison wine] in the shower' 'in garbage bags with fruit flies'.⁵¹ Also, in making such a harsh environment more bearable, Peters, though sarcastically, utters that he, splayed on his bunk, finds his cell 'Part cage, part comfort zone' and emphasizes that he will 'exalt the brickwork' and 'serve dead air' / 'For so long that it starts to feel like home' suggesting that one should 'stash shanks, stack books, fine-tune' one's cell to make it endurable.⁵² He propounds:

With fear, with rage, make yourself feel at home
Make yourself a city inside a cell
Inside one more form of shelter.⁵³

What makes *Sonnets from a Cell* particularly noteworthy in this genre is not only its exploration of prison environments but also their connection to other territories of penal justice and urban spaces that both precede and follow incarceration, often setting the stage for imprisonment. For instance, in 'Pleading Guilty' and 'Diesel Therapy', Peters takes us to the courtroom, reciting:

All the senses are so strong. Lights and sound always present.
The courtroom makes halos with their applause,
... I sit and the opulent lamps shudder
Through regulation blue and red stained glass
Or is that my eyelids? In the courtroom.⁵⁴

And from the courtroom to the road to prison:

Same white van of Plexiglas and sorrow
Idling below the ankle-chain courtroom
...

Steel bunks, holding cells, bleach fumes, pizza pops,
Fingerprints, stale interrogation rooms.
The van revs. The garage doors rise.⁵⁵

Furthermore, some of the poems vividly highlight the link between ‘what counts as criminal’ and ‘where’, focusing on streets, graffiti, skate parks and cruising. Here Peters showcases local spots from his past, such as ‘ravines’, ‘mall parkades’, ‘clapboard barrack’, skid-rows, ‘a camper behind the skate park’, British Columbia’s ‘last-closed residential school’, ‘the snow-weighted roof droops’, dry streets to skate, people’s backyards, abandoned garages and ‘warehouse pubs’.⁵⁶ He depicts a reality where police violence is the new urban justice-making and ‘where houselessness / is the new economy’ and a route to prison.⁵⁷

Besides its political aspects, Peters’s exploration of different zones also demonstrates that prisoners’ limited exposure to mundane things and the natural environment drives them to engage with their confined surroundings and express them uniquely.⁵⁸ Prison writings often reflect the space between prisoners and the outer world that speak exactly from the place of the abovementioned liminality where the separation between ‘inside(r)’ and ‘outside(r)’ is challenged. Often, the juxtaposition of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is used obliquely, simultaneously questioning ‘absence’ and ‘presence’.⁵⁹ As many theorists suggest, ‘imprisonment also necessitates negotiating new concepts of space’, derived largely from an imaginary and mental state.⁶⁰ Most confined poets create new spaces in their writing to offset their lack of access to the outside world, expanding their inner imagination. As Van Vuuren aptly puts it, through the ‘consciousness of the restrictedness of the prison cell and the absence of the unrestricted “outside” . . . the prisoner searches to create new space within which to move, whether it be within memory, stream of associations, dreams, or writing’.⁶¹ These spaces can be as close as a sunbathed prison yard, a nearby forest or a silver sky seen through the barred windows, or oneiric places evoked in their imagination like their homes, childhood locales or hypothetical future dwellings. Peters too projects:

I pretend prison is one lame field trip.
Some nights I stay parked. Some nights I just cruise,
First to my old street, soaked from the sprinkler,
Jeans rolled up, holding the sun-baked driveway,
Which feels like the carpet below church pews
...
Maybe nights are a vehicle I need
To move, get from A to B, to feel free.⁶²

In other poems, he not only daydreams in the shower, contemplates the church as a place of penance like a penitentiary or recalls his schooling times but also, like in ‘Sleep Paralysis’, conjures someone’s felt presence as a fantasy:

I watch you walk across my cell and think
My cell you are walking across my cell
Cool earth pressing through the plastic mattress
Beneath cage lights beneath one more daybreak.⁶³

Interestingly, the appearance of imaginary people and spaces in poems creates a blend of present (physical) and absent (mental) realms, reflecting a concept of ‘ecopoetics’ that refers to the prisoner’s ‘hyper-awareness of environmental encounter’ and demonstrates ‘how environments environ the writer’.⁶⁴ This approach allows writers to momentarily escape their current space and their ‘out-of-body experience to come home to the reader’.⁶⁵ Prison ecopoetics is of utmost importance because, as Nolan notes, if a prison poet, ‘deprived of the variety of physical experience’, can infuse different ‘mental, cultural, imagined and textual components’ together, the ‘complexity of his or her concrete experiences during incarceration’ can be expressed even further. In this way, ‘the multifaceted environment of prison’, a space which is otherwise concealed, restricted and inaccessible, ‘can be glimpsed by the reader’.⁶⁶

In the meantime, these superimposed spaces are also inseparable from overlapping temporalities of past, present and an uncertain future. In prison studies, time – especially ‘doing time’ – is as constitutive as space in shaping the prison experience; just like: ‘Doing time is also doing space, for the temporal distortion is paralleled by tyrannical control of space.’⁶⁷ Thus, this chronotopical aspect – or space-time, or timespace – in poems reveals the carceral conditions further.⁶⁸ Peters’s poems reflect this too, for instance, recounting that ‘The clock stalks them. . . / The clock hikes its charred robe and taps barefoot / Past cell doors. Listen: the shadow ticking / Days on the wall is just the start. Hard time’ or pretending not to care while days pass by physically:⁶⁹

And days caught between the past and nothing.
Pretend not to care. Each day postures up,
...
Pretend not to care. These days I don’t eat,
Sleep, or shit. Days clog their guts with more days,
...
When the day won’t shower, shaves in the sink,
The night warns him once, then cracks his temple
Off the toilet rim. Pretend not to care.’⁷⁰

Lastly, taking the dimensions of poems’ spatio-temporality further, Amy Washburn, in analysing the former prisoner and activist Ericka Huggins’ poetry, uncovers that one of Huggins’s poems ‘functions as a direct spatial challenge to time’ both conceptually and textually, as the words spill continuously over other pages as an ‘active continuity’.⁷¹ This indicates that poems generate also a textual space as another architectural medium on which the experiences of physical prison space are reflected. Peters plays with his nuance masterfully by aptly choosing the sonnet form, which classically explores themes like the passage of time, life’s transience,

psychological complexity and deep emotions. Peters likens the highly strict structures of sonnets – fourteen lines with specific meters and rhyme schemes – to little prison cells on the page; so strict with rules that compel one to find their own voice, individuality and freedom within the given parameters and monotony – much like life in prison.⁷²

Peters is also inspired by a sequence called the ‘crown of sonnets’ (corona or coronet) wherein each poem’s last line becomes the next poem’s first line, and the last line of the final poem is the same as the first line of the initial poem, creating a continuous loop. This ‘architextural’ method highlights two key concepts: first, the architectural circularity of prisons, reminiscent of Van Gogh’s *Prisoners’ Round* (1890) and structures like the panopticon, a surveillance architecture that permits prisoners to be (lieve themselves) constantly observed; second, the cyclical nature of the carceral system, where initial incarceration often leads to a continuous cycle of probation, bail and recidivism, especially for marginalized communities.⁷³ By such architextuality, ‘the poem not only allows but forces the reader to acknowledge the space of the poem on the page’, which eventually enhances the conveyance of the spatial experience of the writer.⁷⁴

Future of the Verses, Verses of the Future

Given the complexity of prison poetics, I propound that poems possess a powerful potential to confront and question the inherently cruel, dysfunctional, outdated and unsustainable dynamics of carceral culture. Despite neoliberal capitalism’s efforts to rebrand the criminal justice system with new modern, aesthetically pleasing prisons and advanced surveillance technologies, the first-hand accounts of prisoners continue to expose the severity of these institutions. While poems, stemming from prisoners’ particular confined space-times within particular architectural typologies inform us about the specificity of these contexts, the similarity of prison spaces and experiences remains striking. All prison writings, thereby, can be considered as public testimonies and eventually intimate descriptions of the coercive nature of the state.⁷⁵ This challenges the belief that prison poems are ‘emancipatory’, ‘cathartic’, ‘therapeutic’ or ‘rehabilitative’, since, as Bradley Peters puts it, there is no art form that can fulfil this role in our broken justice system.⁷⁶ Instead, such testimonies generate ‘critical spaces within the carceral landscape that enable prisoners to speak to the world on their own terms, transgress the spaces that hold them, and foster connections’ with the outside world.⁷⁷ This is also a practice of ‘spatializing hope’ for a world beyond prisons, starting with exposing the cruelty of these places, aiming to inspire action and reimagine them.⁷⁸

In the meantime, ‘the process of reimagining the prison as a physical and social structure is important to the aesthetic of the poetry prison canon’.⁷⁹ Through the spatial examination of prison life, we are reminded that ‘the determining force of space is not just physical or architectural, but resides in the ways that places carry meanings, harbour and cultivate particular practices and sentiments’.⁸⁰ In an era of mass surveillance and carceral capitalism, the poet(ry) offers a way to ‘diminish the divide between incarcerated and non-incarcerated worlds’ and new approaches exempt from penal logic and state violence.⁸¹ This aligns with what prison

abolitionists have long aimed to achieve: Dismantling carceral structures and replacing them with 'life-affirming' institutions where justice is not disciplinary but transformative.⁸² I even daresay that visions of poets and prison abolitionists are intrinsically kindred, as both summon the unimaginable to the point where the conditions for new realities are set to emerge. And if these realities can be imagined, they can also be (un)designed. As American activist, exiled ex-prisoner and poet Assata Shakur impels, 'a wall is just a wall / and nothing more at all / It can be broken down'.⁸³

- 1 See, for instance: David Garland, *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences* (New York, 2001); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, 2003); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, 2010); Jack Norton et al., *The Jail is Everywhere: Fighting the New Geography of Mass Incarceration* (London/ New York, 2024).
- 2 See: Harun Farocki, 'Controlling Observation', in: Alex Farquharson et al. (eds.), *The Impossible Prison: A Foucault Reader* (Nottingham, 2008), 16-20; David Scheer and Colin Lorne, 'Illusions of Utopia: When Prison Architects (Reluctantly) Play Tetris Carceral Spatiality', in: Dominique Moran and Anna K. Schliehe (eds.), *Carceral Spatiality: Dialogues between Geography and Criminology* (London, 2017), 113-134.
- 3 See, for instance: H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York, 1989); Bell Gale Chevigny (ed.), *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (New York, 2011 [1999]); Julian Murphet, *Prison Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Literary Guide* (Edinburgh, 2023).
- 4 Bradley Peters, *Sonnets from a Cell* (Ontario, 2023). I recognize that focusing on a single example when discussing prisons could risk unfairly stigmatizing a particular country or sociopolitical context. However, to provide a more nuanced analysis and avoid generalizations, it was essential to select one work that most effectively encapsulates the issue. I chose *Sonnets from a Cell* for several reasons. First, its recentness underscores that the prison problem remains urgent and relevant in the twenty-first century. Second, originating from the Canadian context, it challenges the notion that severe prison conditions are confined to underdeveloped and developing countries. Finally, it addresses multiple spatial, political and affective dimensions of incarceration by exposing the larger network of carceral capitalism.
- 5 Catharina Gabriellsson et al., 'Reading(s) and Writing(s) Unfolding Processes of Transversal Writing', *Writingplace Journal* 3 (2019), 4-9: 5.
- 6 See: Sophie Angelis, 'Limits to Prison Reform', *UC Irvine Law Review* 13/1 (2018), 1-34; Vera Institute of Justice, 'Reimagining Prison Report', 2018, vera.org/downloads/mass-design-group-reimagining-prison-booklet.pdf.
- 7 David Scott, 'Why Prison? Posing the Question', in: David Scott (ed.), *Why Prison?* (Cambridge, 2013), 1-22: 1.
- 8 Dominique Moran, Yvonne Jewkes and Jennifer Turner, 'Prison Design and Carceral Space', in: Yvonne Jewkes, Ben Crewe and Jamie Bennett (eds.), *Handbook on Prisons* (London, 2016), 114-130; Jennifer Turner, *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space* (London, 2016); Karen M. Morin, *Carceral Space, Prisoners and Animals* (London, 2018).
- 9 Dominique Moran, 'Carceral Geography and the Spatialities of Prison Visiting: Visitation, Recidivism, and Hyperincarceration', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013), 174-190: 175; see also: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London, 2022).
- 10 See, for instance: Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt (ed.), *On the Architectures of Carcerality* (New York, 2020); Mabel O. Wilson, 'Carceral Architectures', in: Nick Axelet al. (eds.), *Superhumanity: Design of the Self* (Minnesota, 2018), 43-54.
- 11 Ben Crewe et al., 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', *Theoretical Criminology* 18/1 (2014), 56-74: 60. See also: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge, 1994).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Angelis, 'Limits to Prison Reform' and Vera Institute of Justice, 'Reimagining Prison Report', op. cit. (note 5).
- 14 Doran Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', *College Literature* 37/3 (2010), 143-166; Scheer and Lorne, 'Illusions of Utopia', op. cit. (note 2).
- 15 Farocki, 'Controlling Observation', op. cit. (note 2).
- 16 Rachel Ellis, 'Prisons as Porous Institutions', *Theory and Society* 50 (2021), 175-199; Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7).
- 17 Ibid., 176.
- 18 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 176; Crewe et al. 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 67, 71.
- 21 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 180.
- 22 Crewe et al. 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life', op. cit. (note 9), 59, 60.
- 23 Moran, 'Carceral Geography', op. cit. (note 7), 184.
- 24 Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12).
- 25 Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*, op. cit. (note 3); Murphet, *Prison Writing in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit. (note 3).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Helize van Vuuren, "'Labyrinth of loneliness': Breyten Breytenbach's Prison Poetry (1976-1985)", *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 46/2 (2009), 43-56: 43, 44.

- 28 Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*, op. cit. (note 3).
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Larson, 'Toward a Prison Poetics', op. cit. (note 12), 145.
- 31 Robert Johnson and Nina Chernoff, "'Opening a Vein': Inmate Poetry and the Prison Experience', *The Prison Journal* 82/2 (2002), 141-167.
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