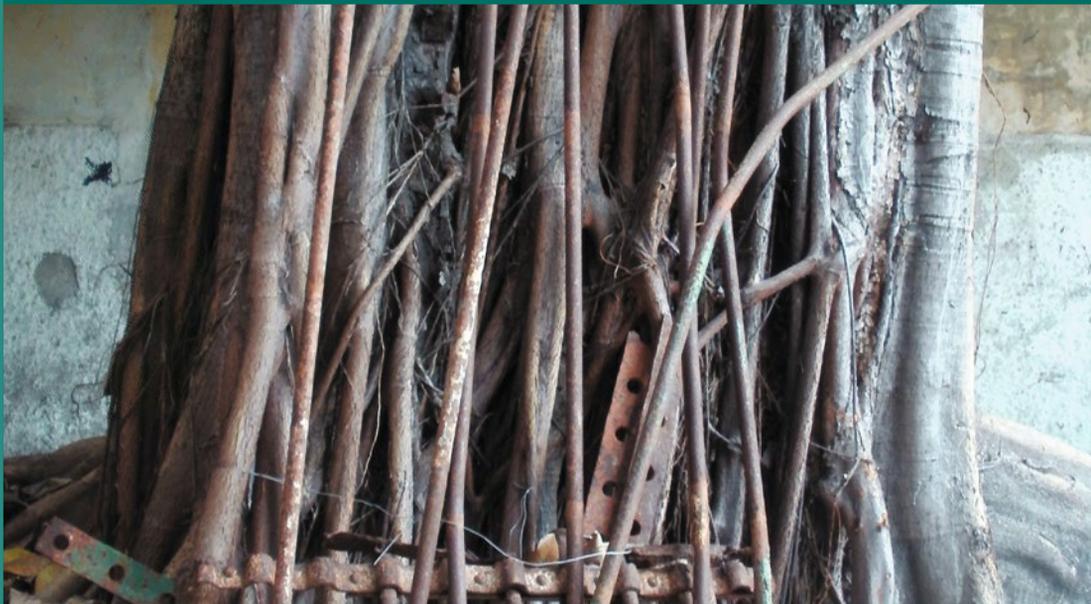




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Carceral Communities in Latin America

Troubling Prison Worlds in the 21st Century

Edited by
Sacha Darke · Chris Garces
Luis Duno-Gottberg · Andrés Antillano

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Editors

Sacha Darke
School of Social Sciences
University of Westminster
London, UK

Luis Duno-Gottberg
Rice University
Houston, TX, USA

Chris Garces
Universidad San Francisco de Quito
Cumbaya, Ecuador

Andrés Antillano
Central University of Venezuela
Caracas, Miranda, Venezuela

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Notes on Contributors

Andrés Antillano is Professor and Chair of Criminology at the Escuela de Derecho and researcher at the Institute of Criminal Sciences of the Universidad Central de Venezuela. He has written several articles and book chapters about prisons, police, violence, and gangs.

Libardo José Ariza is an associate professor at the School of Law of Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá-Colombia) and is currently co-director of the Prisons Group (a legal clinic). His research and academic interests focus on Criminology, Sociology of Punishment, Sociology of Law, Criminal Law, and Constitutional Law.

Karina Biondi holds a doctoral degree in Social Anthropology from the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar). She is professor at the State University of Maranhão (UEMA), where she coordinates the Laboratory of Studies in Political Anthropology. Biondi's research interests include prisoners, criminals, and technologies of crime control and punishment. She is author of *Sharing This Walk: An Ethnography of Prison Life PCC in Brazil* (winner of the APLA 2017 Book Prize) and *Proibido Roubar na Quebrada: Território, Lei e Hierarquia no PCC* (winner of the LASA Brazil Section Book Prize 2019).

Jon Horne Carter is a sociocultural anthropologist who writes about criminality, aesthetics, and sovereignty. He is Assistant Professor of

Anthropology at Appalachian State University and co-director of the AppState Ethnography Lab. He has been working in Honduras since 1997.

Francesca Cerbini is a senior researcher at the Center for Research in Anthropology (CRIA), University of Minho (UMinho). She carried out ethnographic fieldwork mainly in Bolivia, concerning the everyday life within the self-governed male prison of San Pedro (La Paz), and in Brazil, on the dengue epidemic and the local community engagement in public health related issues. At CRIA-UMinho, she is currently involved in a long-term ethnography on religious pluralism within Portuguese prisons.

Sacha Darke is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Westminster, Visiting Lecturer in Law at the University of São Paulo, and Affiliate at King's Brazil Institute, King's College London. His interests include Brazilian prison order and prison higher education. He is a founding member of British Convict Criminology, and author of *Conviviality and Survival: Co-Producing Brazilian Prison Order* (2018).

Kristen Drybread is a cultural anthropologist based at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She has written on prison rapes and murders, political corruption, and the meanings of unremarked graves. Her current project examines relationships between citizenship and violence in Brazil.

Luis Duno-Gottberg is a Professor at Rice University. He specializes in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century Caribbean culture, with emphasis on race and ethnicity, politics, violence, and visual culture. His book project, *Dangerous People: Hegemony, Representation and Culture in Contemporary Venezuela*, explores the relationship between popular mobilization, radical politics, and culture. Duno-Gottberg taught at Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas, Venezuela, and Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. He was director of Caribbean and Latin American Studies while at FAU, where he also directed the MA in Comparative Literatures.

Cory Fischer-Hoffman is Visiting Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Lafayette College. She completed her PhD in Latin American, Caribbean and US Latino Studies from the University of Albany in 2016 with her dissertation focused on prison regime formation in Venezuela. Her work as a journalist, radio producer, and oral historian shapes her

research on prison media and the gendered reproductive labor of prison visits in Venezuela. After moving to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for a post-doctoral fellowship in Digital Humanities at Lehigh University, she commenced her next big project: tracing the history of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation's iron mining operations in Latin America.

Chris Garces teaches at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ) as Research Professor of Anthropology. His ethnographic interests range from the study of politics and religion—or contemporary political ideologies—to the unchecked global development of penal state politics and the history of Catholic humanitarian interventions in Latin America.

Manuel Iturralde is an associate professor at the School of Law of Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá-Colombia) and is currently co-director of the Prisons Group (a legal clinic). His research and academic interests focus on Criminology, Sociology of Punishment, Sociology of Law, and Criminal Law.

Fiona Macaulay's is Associate Professor in the department of Peace Studies and International Development at the University of Bradford. She previously worked for Amnesty International as their Brazil researcher and her research interests focus on criminal justice system reform, human rights, and on gender, violence and security issues in Latin America, especially Brazil. Ongoing research projects include the transformation of state responses to femicide and the involvement of police officers in politics in Brazil.

Hollis Moore is an assistant professor in the Department of Law and Legal Studies at Carleton University. She holds a PhD in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of Toronto (2017). Her academic interests include the intersection between political and legal anthropology, urban ethnography, and the study of gender and family life. She has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in and around prisons in Northeast Brazil. At its core, her research examines the sociality of uneven carceral expansion. She is currently conducting a longitudinal study of the trajectories of young Brazilians who have experienced the incarceration of a parent. This project focuses on the (re)production of marginalization through criminal law, policing, and imprisonment as well as intergenerational processes of care and (de)criminalization.

Caroline Mary Parker is a presidential postdoctoral fellow of Medical Anthropology in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. Her work combines approaches in cultural and medical anthropology and public health with a geographical focus on the Caribbean and the urban United States. Her anthropological work engages questions of social suffering, poverty, and inequality; addiction therapeutics, labor, and the carceral state, and liberalism, boredom, and temporality. Her work has been published in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Her first book project, *Carceral Livelihoods in Puerto Rico*, examines the use of unpaid labor as a treatment for drug addiction in Puerto Rican therapeutic communities.

Jennifer Peirce is a doctoral candidate in criminology at John Jay College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Her dissertation research on the Dominican prison reform experience was funded in part by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada). She works on research and policy focused on reducing incarceration in Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America.

Iván Pojomovsky is a PhD candidate from the Sociology Program of the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, in Recife, Brazil. He has conducted ethnographic work on police accountability, violence, and participation mechanisms, all in urban popular contexts in Venezuela. He is researching on a comparative perspective on different forms of inmate self-government in Venezuela and Brazil.

Chelina Sepúlveda Is an MSc in Social Anthropology and Ethnology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris), a professor in the Sociology Department of Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), and researcher of Instituto de Estudios Avanzados (IDEA). Her research interests center around ethnography of the popular classes. In this perspective, she has approached the subject of violence and social conflict as related to exclusion processes from the viewpoint of the transformation in the relationship between the state and poor communities. She has developed ethnographic work in penitentiary institution and urban poor contexts.

Loïc Wacquant is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne, Paris. His interests include urban marginality, penality, carnality, and social theory. He is the author of the trilogy *Urban Outcasts* (2008), *Punishing the Poor* (2009) and *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of the Penal State* (forthcoming).

Julienne Weegels is Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies at the Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA), University of Amsterdam. She has conducted extensive multi-sited ethnographic research inside and around Nicaragua's prison system. Her research focuses on (former) prisoners' experiences of imprisonment and the state, violence, and the politics of (dis)order.

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1

Ethnographic Reflexivity and Ethics of Community in the New Mass Carceral Zone

Chris Garces and Sacha Darke

Whatever one might argue about prisons in Latin America or the Caribbean today, cross-regional booms in prison construction signal an immediate, pressing need for new kinds of study and critical diagnostics—and a revisiting of the ethics of community. The Western Hemisphere beyond North America occupies a key role in any study of the last quarter century of globalized carceral accelerationism. Almost all countrywide prison populations have doubled or tripled in size since the mid-to-late 1990s: national numbers approached, and sometimes surpassed, 300

Sacha Darke would like to acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust. He is currently a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellow (award RF-2020-373\8). His research focuses on community self-governance in Brazilian former-prisoner-led voluntary sector NGO prisons.

C. Garces (✉)
Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Cumbaya, Ecuador

S. Darke (✉)
School of Social Sciences, University of Westminster, London, UK

locked-up individuals per hundred-thousand national population. Indeed, the ranks of the incarcerated grew in Latin and Central America more than in any other global region, from approximately 650,000 in 2000 to 1.5 million in 2014 (Walmsley 2018). Every Latin American country has a prison population far above the global average, and subjects more people to living in cages than they did in 2000 (ibid). Moreover, in most territories, the rise in prison population has far exceeded police recorded increase in serious violent crime. This global trend quietly generates ethical imbroglios and practical stresses in any number of national contexts, particularly when incarceration rates have grown proportionally faster than the curve of national population—most troublesomely, in nominally democratic states—with multiple ill-understood collateral consequences and ramifying political economic effects.

Brute nationwide numbers place this trend in broader relief. Among the countries covered in this volume, for example, Nicaragua's prison rate reached 278 per 100,000 in 2017, up from 128 in 2000; that countrywide figure now stands at 332. In the same year, Venezuela's prison rate reached 178 (up from 58 in 2000). The *Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones* has recognized the existence of 57,096 state prisoners, but also estimates that 32,000 prisoners were being held in police station jails—which brings Venezuela's nationwide number more accurately closer to 276. Ecuador had 64 prisoners per 100,000 in 2000, but that number has jumped to 224 only two decades later. In the meantime, Honduras stands at 237 as of September 2019. Populous Brazil of course remains the region's leading incarcerator. At 759,518 adult prisoners as of June 2020, Brazil's official prison population had increased by more than 2000 percent from December 1984, when only 37,071 adults were imprisoned (Pavarini and Giamberardino 2011); the number of Brazilian prisoners per 100,000 currently stands at some 357 souls. The situation is equally stark across the Caribbean; among territories/nations explored in this volume, Puerto Rico had approximately 313 per 100,000 in July 2017, and the Dominican Republic was at 243 as of September 2019. Other Caribbean islands we do not explore here are equally or far more troubled: Trinidad and Tobago (292), Cuba (510), the U.S. Virgin Islands (412), Guadeloupe (814), and Barbados (874), to name but a few. Although generally smaller in population, the problem of carcerality across the Greater Antilles rivals

only that of the United States which resides at 665 per hundred thousand (figures provided by World Prison Brief, accessed 30 August 2020).

Ethnographic research on prisons and carcerality in South America and the Caribbean demonstrate how the condemning/caging of human beings can indeed be “normalizing” in practice, but never in any case quite “normal.” For starters, national figures are usually higher than reports would suggest. States are incentivized to publicize “incarceration rate” numbers favorable to instrumental government interests, and local or international watchdog groups observe what they can during their occasional, indispensable, short-term prison visits. Slipping through the cracks of such formal tallies are shadow prisoners, temporarily detained subjects, illegal immigrants, adolescents held in administrative detention, and people held under house arrest and the special category of dangerous inmates being held virtually incommunicado in supermaximum security cellblocks; such individuals, typically un(der)counted in citywide or federal statistics, only add to the state’s *de facto* labyrinthine concentration and “public disappearance” of criminally stigmatized, sentenced, or unruly populations.

This volume brings forward a powerfully representative sample of ethnographic research exploring the multifaceted practical and ethical problems of regional carceral acceleration. For every newly imprisoned Latin American subject, volume contributors observe that a myriad of civilians’ everyday lives and futures have been interrupted or jarringly altered by prison population expansion—starting, of course, with prisoners and their loved ones. Our work as a whole is dedicated to them and to their configurations of care and collective lines of flight from abject forms of domination; or, more specifically, to a better understanding of Latin American prisoners’ modalities of survival; to the untold numbers of civilians who traverse the space of the prison or protect prisoners against penal state abuses; or to those for whom prisoners of state remain stubbornly un-subtractable from one’s family or broader community. This is the work of prison ethnography. On the one hand, our volume brings together empirically grounded, theoretically innovative research and interdisciplinary activist pushback against the disintegrative social forces of contemporary carcerality—probing and exposing its visible and invisible apparatuses. On the other hand, each of these studies, informed by long-term prison fieldwork in men’s prisons, highlights the ethical

dynamics and problems involved when carceral communities quietly organize and attempt to navigate regimes of punitive enclosure.

Through years of collaborative research with people who inhabit prison facilities, ethnographers understand intuitively that carceral communities quite often exist to defy the “names” (or material-symbolic destinies) bestowed on them by non-incarcerated prison specialists. In contrast to economic game theories, abstract archetypal systems, and cognitive behaviorist understandings of prisoners’ motives, activist and self-reflexive ethnographic models help to comprehend prison dynamics, system-wide problems, and the unintentional harms of living in cages from the perspectives of prisoners themselves. Ethnographic research today may have its empirical strengths and limitations and tendencies toward exploration of “the dark sides” of contemporary life (Ortner 2016), but long-term, first-person, theoretically informed fieldwork—carried out inside prison facilities—brings forward unusual insights into what goes without saying across the grotesque task of storing away human beings in states of punitive custody. The prison ethnographer’s mode of bearing “secondary witness” (cf. LaCapra 2011) to a problematic “ethics of captivity” (cf. Gruen 2014), we submit, offers untold humanizing perspectives into the formation of communities largely invisible or misrecognized by the state in its unstinting obsessions with policing sovereign violence and control (Blom and Stepputat 2006). It is to the study of this most curious blind spot in research on prison worlds that volume contributors, from a variety of different disciplinary backgrounds, direct their ethnographic fieldwork, subtle policy insights, and personal concerns. In this introductory chapter, we therefore put forward a theory of carceral community and demonstrate how reflexive ethnographic fieldwork allows for extraordinary depth of inquiry into these infra-political formations, along with how they pose a direct challenge to common theoretical understandings of biopolitics, sovereignty, and the invisibilized influence of carcerality on other communities and broader national publics.

Carceral Communities

By personal choice, ethnographers place their own bodies into often-uncomfortably situated problem areas in order to gain better, previously unacknowledged insight into this “new mass carceral zone” (Darke and

Garces 2017: 2). Unlike other forms of scholarship, however, we generally stop at nothing to privilege the knowledge, experiences, and desires of prisoners themselves, a process we define below and our contributors explore in greater detail across the volume as a whole. Prison ethnographers are typically drawn to interpret the vital material importance of collectivism, taking into account the multiple “worlds,” “networks,” “relations,” or human-material “affordances” that comprise life inside contemporary prison estates. We actively track the ways in which prisoners suffer and seek delimited enjoyments, being subject to deliberate state-imposed deprivations, while attempting to make contingent peace with, or to short-circuit modalities of dehumanizing social engineering. Each volume contributor demonstrates how different modalities of prison communitarianism well up organically in men’s prisons, if not always consciously or instrumentally, in response to serialized civil dispossession, or the deracinated prison-absence of loved ones, friends, colleagues, or neighbors. Their being thrown into the penal complex, new relationships and elective affinities quickly become paramount to one’s survival. As a result, prisons themselves become what might be called community-generating machines, whether or not prison staff, state actors, and popular or social media are willing to recognize this entrenched side-effect of carcerality as such. It is precisely for this reason why our volume could just as easily have been called *Anticarceral Communities*.

The intrinsic desire to survive imprisonment, or to embrace delimited modes of carceral flourishing, generates novel and typically misunderstood varieties of *communitas*, ritualized forces of effervescent togetherness operating inside as well as at maximal remove from “the state”—or at least at an extreme distance from assorted, self-denominated experts who attempt to see the prison “like a state” (cf. Scott 1998). Those who bear witness to self-governing Latin American and Caribbean prison communities are all too often tainted by the Western, Occidental tendency to assume other countries or regions are “like our own” (cf. Coronil 1996, 2004). Such ethnocentric assumptions are not only largely misplaced, but are also remarkably dangerous. They can make us blind to regionally grounded, alternately cosmopolitan, ethnic, or cultural differences, and have been the cause of many a failed, one-size-fits-all prison policy being imported into the region that ultimately ended up doing more harm than good. More generally, they divert our gaze away from

‘ideas and theory rooted in the history and experience of societies of the [Global] South’ (Carrington et al. 2016: 2).

Carceral communities develop across Latin American and Caribbean men’s prisons as collectives or subcultures on cellblock wings; foreign-national or regionally distinct affinity groups; ad hoc therapeutic sodalities; prisoner leadership councils; infra-political blocs of violent entrepreneurs; or simply as groups of friends—in addition, at times, to being de facto extensions of legitimate or outlawed political parties; local or international gangs; paramilitary or guerillas; multinational drug cartels; and even incarcerated former members of state military or police forces. Carceral communities therefore spring up intra-, inter-, or even extra-institutionally vis-à-vis any prison complex. The deep ethnographic study of carceral community permits a better understanding of how—in addition to being a poorly understood though central bureaucratic field of the contemporary state (Wacquant 2003, 2005, 2008)—the prison itself has morphed into a largely disavowed, non- or para-state project of community outgrowth. And yet, the full extent to which prisons turn unconsciously into vectors of and for “community development” has been systematically, and oftentimes tragically, unacknowledged.

Prisons exert “force at a distance” both inside and outside their physical-material constraints. Consider for instance the prison’s exteriorizing/demonizing role—perhaps the best-known reactionary and negative manifestation of public responses to carceral communities. Especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, where law is unashamedly used and barely disguised as a motivated tool of injustice and repression (e.g. Castro 1987; Zaffaroni 1989; Aguirre and Salvatore 2001). National publics who advocate for zero tolerance policing and prosecutorial efforts, along with the criminalization of certain urban subjects—poor and working class youths of color, and, increasingly, economic refugees—celebrate how prisons, or their ominous concrete action at a distance, inoculate civilians against *felt*, imminent threats to one’s personal, family-oriented, and/or private economic security. The prison turns into a concrete reminder of how penal policy efforts tacitly exercise psychological and ontological influence across the state. The Latin American carceral complex becomes inseparable from modern understandings of citizen-being and its variety of others. Witness a flagrant crime, then throw any offender(s) across the legal-physical threshold of the society-versus-prison divide.

In the name of defending “citizens security,” for example, entire urban districts have recently seen their architectural and public cultures transformed in tandem to provide physical barriers and psychological buffers against crime and carceral community. Common manifestations of this development include the building of commercial security corridors through the policing of “urban renewal” (Garces 2004; Gandolfo 2009; Collins 2015); the territorial expansion of private gated communities and the barred window-front, protective walling-in of poor and middle class households (Caldeira 2000; Andrade 2007); and vertical or “Narcotectura” developments such as high-rise buildings and high-tech apartment compounds, technologically beyond the reach of the streets across “insecure urban areas” (O’Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013; O’Neill 2016). Meanwhile, political parties actively bolster such private and collective material responses to fear of criminality, feeding into public demand for *mano dura* policing and perpetual prison construction—complex psychological and socio-political processes entirely dependent on carcerality, rather conveniently labeled “penal populism” (Sozzo 2007). Popular civilian understandings of community, in any case, have been actively retooled, not merely “in the shadows” or “far away” from prisons, but rather propagating cybernetically in lock-step with their monstrous and seemingly limitless material potential for concentrating-segregating and caging criminalized subjects (Müller 2013; Carter 2014; Garces 2014a; Hathazy and Müller 2016).

Most influential Latin American research on carcerality to date has focused on the centrifugal function of neoliberal and postneoliberal state policing. The prison has indeed quietly shifted its role in state-organized society, from being institutions of social rehabilitation, to an interiorized dumping grounds for the mass warehousing or “internment” of criminal subjects (Birkbeck 2011) or the (il)logical neoliberal end-point of an increasingly militarized “penalization of poverty” (Wacquant 2003). Building on these foundational frameworks, our volume is among the first collective works to systematically, comparatively explore the multiple ways in which disavowed non-state kernels of community-building potential develop behind the edifice of prison walls, allowing for illicit circulation within, across, and beyond different penal institutions. If there are historical intellectual precedents to viewing carceral community as such, they would include Durkheimian sociology and its successive

interdisciplinary interlocutors. In this trajectory of sociological thought, different forms of organic solidarity and the maintenance of *conscience collective* always require a material, performative manifestation of “community” as a proxy for localized “international relations,” subtly requiring the exercise of soft power (ritual and liaisonship) as well as hard power (taboo expulsion/abandonment) in any active community-building process (2014[1893], 2008[1912]).

As Andrés Antillano, Sacha Darke, Kristen Drybread, Jennifer Peirce, Jon Horne Carter, and Cory Fischer-Hoffman demonstrate in the opening chapters of the volume, in the contexts of Venezuela, Brazil, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, Latin American men’s prisons inmates are more than often left by prison administrators to manage everyday routines and order in the cellblocks. In Brazil, Darke illustrates, newly arrived detainees often receive no more than the briefest registration and most cursory of health checks, and within 24 hours delivered straight to “inmate leaders” or “inmate representatives” for their triage, instruction, and care. In Venezuela, Fischer-Hoffman emphasizes, inmate bosses further utilize their authority to mobilize and tax prison labor. Across central and south America, even the power to discipline is displaced, and in some prisons formally delegated, to inmates. In effect, penal state “order” becomes a matter of negotiation between selected prisoners and the titular prison administration, while the majority rarely have need or reason to deal with prison staff. Any study of Latin American prison order, as Antillano insists, should start from the “bottom up.” This arguably continues to be the case in even the most “modern” of prison units, including the Dominican Republic, where authorities have made concerted efforts to build new international human-rights-compliant facilities, and to recruit extra staff. Peirce explains that Dominican Republican prisoners have had difficulty adjusting to the attempted formalizing of everyday discipline and order in the country’s much lauded “new prison” system. As Drybread emphatically reminds us, absence of formal, top-down order is also important to understanding the plight of prison inmates—in this case, those arrested for rape—whose crimes cause them to be ostracized and themselves violated by other prisoners, with the knowledge and tacit facilitation of prison staff.

Symptomatically, most regional ethnographers follow the carceral traffic in bodies, goods, technologies, relations of love, and feelings of belonging which transcend or criminally trespass what prison walls attempt to keep uncivilly segregated and apart. The oft-stated anthropological insight into state carcerality's innermost failures, that is, the so-called porosity of the prison, described most carefully by Cunha (2014), is therefore nothing if not a mirror reflecting clandestine mobilizations of carceral communities themselves. Furtive compacts about "permissible illicit trafficking" help to facilitate the prison's informal living networks, relations, and affordances—temporary escape routes, both into and out of the penal complex, undermining the prison-institution's inherent world-destroying capabilities (Martin and Chantraine 2018). These simultaneously centrifugal *and* centripetal forces effectively blur any singular point of origin of and for the omnipresent traffic increasingly generated by systems of hyperincarceration. Ethnographic fieldworkers trace these furtive movements in practice and show how they reaffirm the integral problem of maintaining bonds of relationality over time within the space of the prison itself. Here, the ethnographer's task becomes that of showing how the prison becomes an active, albeit deeply fraught and problematically dissociative institution. In a word, we materially humanize a system programmed to dehumanize. Ethnographers explore these multifarious, oftentimes illicit pathways toward prisoners' psychological re-integration and the mitigated enjoyment of common pleasures, without cartographically drawing crime maps of consequential "threats," "risks," or "blame" for non-incarcerated others to exoticize, demonize, or prosecute. At the same time, we throw a far-reaching, skeptical spotlight onto other scholars' policy-minded research when such modes of inquiry fail to take prisoners' safety and living forms of relationality to heart.

As in all labor-intensive, large-scale infrastructural projects, the "smooth functioning" of an expanding penal state architecture—that is, jails, penitentiaries, rehabilitation centers, maximum security sites, and detention facilities—typically requires permanent and credit relationships between prisoners (or prisoners and select administrative staff), the development of symbolic or literal debt accumulation, and tacit social pacts largely ignored in broader civilian life. Again, this point is particularly poignant in Central and South America, where one of the major

consequences of rising prison populations has been an equally dramatic and consequential decrease in the proportion of staff to inmates. At the end of the twentieth century, Latin American prison historians called attention to research on secretive “pacts” being fundamental to any understanding of prison life-worlds—both in the past and present alike (Aguirre and Salvatore 2001; Salvatore and Aguirre 2010). This volume will serve as a direct response, update, and extension of their provocation. Most citizens only rarely gain access to the day-to-day work of survival or the strange dehumanizing affordances that are part and parcel of living and working inside a prison complex. As Carter illustrates in this volume, so-called breakdowns in prison order, such as fires, strikes, escapes, riots, or disease outbreaks (e.g. HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and Covid-19), bring this curious contemporary institution temporarily back into public media and civil discourse. During these extraordinary periods, carceral communities are typically demonized as the source of penal state malfunction, and this, despite the penal state’s glaring Achilles Heel that carceral communities are always indispensable to proxy administrative management of the wings, or the ways in which any prisoner’s day-to-day life becomes minimally tolerable. When “emergency” becomes restored to so-called normalcy, such carceral communities (glossed over by media, prison staff, or state functionaries as “mafias,” “gangs,” or “cartels”) are subsequently marched back inside the complex and out of public view, their largely invisible, hub-like “pluri-relational” role in prison governance having been restored to its proper place. The responses to the 2013 and 2014 fires in La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula prisons, Honduras, allegedly instigated by anti-gang security forces, are instructive. Despite the national outrage caused by the 197 official death count, Carter explains that for the ordinary MS-13 or Barrio 18 inmate, life immediately went back to normal. Prison gangs locked themselves back up in their self-governed barracks, from where prison staff rarely heard a word.

Events in Mexico over the last 20 years draw particular attention to the way in which “emergency periods” in the federal prison system (CEFERESO) belie deeper understandings of the largely unconscious operations of carceral community. During the rise of internecine warfare between drug Cartels, which involved killings of rival groups within and

between cellblocks, CEFERESO prison ministry officials developed whole stand-alone prisons in order to shelter and demobilize Cartels, whether the Zetas, for example, or the Sinaloa Cartel, and others. Carceral communities proved to be so intransigent, and dangerous to rivals, that state officials preferred housing them in separate facilities. When Cartels openly defy CEFERESO orders, say, by releasing an inmate from prison to carry out a nighttime “hit” and to subsequently return to the facility under cover of darkness, or when Cartel leaders, such as Joaquín Guzmán “El Chapo” Loera, could effectively enjoy negotiated sovereign privileges over a whole CEFERESO supermaximum prison and stage his own escape twice, this does not necessarily speak to any anomalous, emergency period power-sharing between carceral communities and their titular prison administrations (although it potentially could). It rather more precisely demonstrates the deeply embedded, implacable role that carceral communities simultaneously play on the insides of all prison facilities, between their facilities, and on the outsides of facilities themselves (Garces 2018). To fail to pay attention to carceral communities and their interests has been all-too common and, in the end, ultimately a grave mistake.

The prison may thus, again, be understood as a strange kind of dissociative institution, as any number of theorists in other contexts have argued—highlighting how imprisonment feeds into modes of individual alienation, estrangement, existential vertigo, and psychoses of corporeal disintegration or comprehensive feelings of being conspiratorially subject to state and non-state terror (Rhodes 2004; Guenther 2013; Reiter 2016). Prisons give civilian publics a most curious license, or prerogative, to turn their backs on individuals and ostracized communities tainted with the brush of criminality and relegated to spatial/physical separation from the *polis* at large. Only, from the perspective of those who are imprisoned, including their loved ones and associates, the prison oftentimes rather cruelly becomes the concrete material manifestation *of the polis itself*. Our authors ingeniously lay out how and why carceral communities thus spring into existence against broader society’s unrelenting sovereign, “democratic” demand to imprison more and more subjects.

Ethnographic Reflexivity

Latin American carceral regimes may have become the material-and-symbolic grounds for untold experiments on human beings' punitive enclosure or civil abandonment; for the ad hoc managerial tinkering with the limits of human custody; and for the outsourcing of justice, as when prison management becomes too financially burdensome, and the state devolves its custodial responsibilities to private agents and individuals—delegating penal tasks to “model inmates” themselves, as in the curious figure of the prisoner “*trustee*.” Most, but not all, forms of punitive enclosure maintain criminalized populations physically segregated from civilians at large. Yet it would be a categorical error to understand Latin American jails, detention centers and prisons as isolated institutions. Prison ethnography focuses by contrast on the prison as a multiplex, easily misrecognized bundle of interpersonal movement and long-lasting community bonds. In her chapter, for example, Hollis Moore explores how the *Mata Oscura* neighborhood in Northeast Brazil grew up alongside the state's largest penal compound. Further sharpening new ethnographic work on the intimate relationship between “the prison” and “the street,” which look to the prison's urban ecologies of exclusion as an interface of deep urban circuitry, cross-cutting movement, and ceaseless exchange (Weegels et al. 2020), Moore shows us how material and symbolic flows across Mata Oscura's prison threshold evidence the literal co-development of a stigmatized yet inseparable “prison-neighborhood nexus.”

Similarly, prison ethnographers demonstrate how shifting norms of carcerality doubly shape the lives of criminalized populations *and* their imprisoned neighbors alike. Although typically working within national academies, particular disciplines, and local contexts, ethnographers figure mainly as *outsiders* who tend to play an outsized institutional role in documenting the continent-wide rise of penal state expansionism and theorizing its modes of governance, interpersonal life-worlds, and/or hidden political economies. Book-length ethnographic works by Cerbini (2012), Biondi (2016), Darke (2018), and Weegels (2018) stand as testimonies to deep study of the inner worlds of the prison and public

misinformation about the stigmatized denizens of these institutions. Such ethnographic works not only “broaden,” comparatively, but also “deepen,” across sustained in-person and theoretically informed fieldwork, the traditional study of prison worlds, querying what might be called “ethnographic first questions” such as how incarceration most curiously remains a universalized mode of punishment—but they also explore what carcerality effectively means and does in practice to individuals and groups of human beings.

Prison religion is an increasingly important area of ethnographic investigation in Latin America and in other parts of the world. The very history of the prison derives in large part from the secularization of religious concepts such as “guilt,” “punishment,” “penitence,” and a host of other keywords whose meanings unmoored themselves and remade cultural life in their transit from premodern to modern bureaucratic worlds. Latin American Catholic and Protestant traditions greatly influence the idea of the prison as space for controlling political as well as moral sovereignty over “Fallen” populations (O’Neill 2010). Prisons themselves become staging grounds for religious movements of personal spiritual flight and revitalization (Macaulay 2014; Garces 2019), or therapeutic recovery of drug-addicted individuals (Garcia and Anderson 2016, Parker, this volume), or “reclamation” from a life of criminal activity and family disintegration (Darke 2014, this volume; O’Neill 2016). Still other religious movements are remarkably particular and derive in large part from local, hybridized Christian and indigenous practices. In this volume, Francesca Cerbini adds a considerable new chapter to the study of Andean religion in her Bolivian ethnographic fieldwork in La Paz’s San Pedro Prison. Inside one of the most classic examples of a Latin American “prisoner-run prison,” Cerbini analyzes how in carceral spaces governed largely by prisoners themselves, requiring constant renegotiation and exchange, “legitimation” potentially turns into a fraught matter of contested authority and debate. Andean ritual complexes involving the expert use of magic and witchcraft, which anthropologists have long demonstrated inspire fear and control across the Andes, are here recast as a mode of community regulation, at once stable but always potentially marked by the personal threat of black magic—in Cerbini’s words, “where different powers are set against each other to create or destroy likewise.”

Similarly, carceral communities oftentimes reframe, navigate, and reorder the space of the prison as a religious territorial zone. Many ethnographers develop friendships and collaborative modes of research that openly participate “deeply,” or perhaps complicitly, in this popular carceral symbolic-material “transubstantiation.” Speaking to a hard-nosed, field-leading lawyer in the International Commission on Human Rights, one of us was struck when she responded to our query, “what would you do if you were sentenced to time in a Latin American prison?”[;] she immediately and without hesitation responded, “I’d join the first Evangelical prison community I could find.” The reason, she said, was that they protected one another and against the typical kinds of blackmail, physical extortion, and modes of domination that prevail in many, if not all, penal complexes. The full ethical entailments of such religious pursuits, be they quasi-secularized, sincere yet instrumentalized, or even perhaps simple protection rackets, may not always be fully understood by the researcher, but their religious participatory relationship often becomes the immediate entry point of one’s access to carceral community. Ethnographers in tandem draw reflexively upon how prison religion alters one’s relationship to the wages of punishment and appeal to sovereign power wrought by the spiritualization of responses to national hyperincarceration (Garces 2010).

Importantly, ethnographic research on prisons as an outsider to the prison system as a whole *demand*s a fair measure of reflexivity. Ethnographic reflexivity may be said to originate in the disciplinary history of professional cultural anthropology, whereby the researcher was (stereo-)typically asked to eschew his or her own cultural value system in the act of researching other peoples’ life-worlds. Ethnography’s historic reliance on this kind of “cultural relativism” is often highly misunderstood, as early ethnographic theorists such as Boas, Mead, Bateson, and others, rarely considered the possibility of the individual researcher’s capacity to fully bracket or entirely ignore their own forms of cultural reasoning—subtly nationalized Western values in studying “non-Western cultures.” Rather, ethnography’s pioneers were influenced by speculative reasoning in the European natural field sciences and in particular by German theorists in the exact sciences such as Heisenberg and Einstein, whose “field challenging” concepts of relativism had deeply problematized fidelity even to