Ethnographic imagination in the field of the prison

Lorna A Rhodes considers how the 'telling details' of prison life come into view through ethnographic practice

In this article I propose that something about ethnographic practice itself can help us expand our understanding of what is possible for the ethnography of prisons. By seeing ethnography, not in terms of method as such, but as a specific perception of our surroundings – an apprehension of figure and ground – I suggest a way in which we might approach our collective imagination as prison ethnographers in creative and perhaps unexpected ways.

What Loïc Wacquant lamented in 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography' was the historical loss of ethnographic attention to the US prison complex (2002). This situation is gradually being remedied in the US, while prison research expands and gains coherence in Europe and elsewhere. But the problems identified by Wacquant certainly remain: prison ethnographers are limited by the inaccessibility, secrecy, and security preoccupations characteristic of these institutions. The ethnographer encounters in the prison an inversion of the guiding premise of her craft, as the fundamentally relational quality of the ethnographic method encounters restriction, surveillance, and suspicion.

But what actually happens in ethnographic fieldwork that points toward what we *can* (and often do) accomplish despite the limitations placed on us? To give a very small example, in my study of prisons in Washington State I was able to observe how prisoners are received into the system, passing through a series of steps that includes the creation of a photo ID card for each new inmate. Describing the process in *Total Confinement*, I wrote:

> Next to the photo ID station I find a big box full of discarded identification badges. Dozens of pictures of prisoners fill this box, men staring warily out of the laminated plastic. Some have closed, defiant faces, others are studiedly neutral; some are sad and exhausted, their eyes full of fear, and I see in one man the over-wide eyes of the fetal alcohol affected.

(Rhodes, 2004)

This passage resulted from the fact that when I left the prison I was preoccupied with that moment of my day. The detail and poignancy of that box of photos is what begged to be written down and what nagged at me as I tried to shape a description of the receiving process. Those photos were haunting and upsetting, but also good to think with – and that thinking, which included a working out of how mentally ill individuals are incorporated into and emerge from the system, is what finally ended up on the page.

Sociologist Avery Gordon provides an important clue as to why certain events and images come to occupy the foreground of the ethnographer's attention. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2007) she turns briefly to something Roland Barthes says in his long illustrated essay about photography, *Camera Lucida*. Barthes notes that many photographs have something in the image that catches us, a haunting detail that he calls the 'punctum'. 'This element rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me… the word [punctum]… also refers to the notion of punctuation … photographs speckled with sensitive points—the telling detail, the punctuation mark' (Barthes, 1981). This telling detail, the *punctum,* the punctuation mark we see or hear, is what Barthes calls 'the accident that…bruises… is poignant'. It does not just draw attention to itself, and is not just illustration or decoration; rather, the punctum draws whole scenes around it and opens out onto the understanding made possible by the larger ethnographic whole. In Gordon's words, punctums 'make meaning meaningful, convey the existence of something… eloquently…[have] power to attract, to draw me in, sometimes beside myself' (1997).

It is possible to have a photograph, or an ethnographic experience, with no sensitive point, no punctuation. In this case what we see is a field – Barthes called it the *studium* -the background, a certain uniformity of focus from which we learn; this is what Gordon describes as 'a kind of participation in the cultural, historical, and politically transparent information of the photograph' (ibid). The punctum emerges in relation to this background, bringing forward a new relationship between itself and the field around it. It points above all to what Barthes calls the 'blind field' – which, in Gordon's words, 'is never named as such in the photograph…It is precisely what is pressing in from the other side of the fullness of the image displayed within the frame; the *punctum* only ever evokes it and the necessity of finding it…' (ibid).

The way in which the punctum inspires a search for the blind field happens first between the photographer and what she photographs, the ethnographer and what he sees or hears. But later on it becomes the bridge between photographer and viewer, between ethnographer and reader. Each point is fundamentally relational, so that the 'other side' – what we can't see

at first – comes into view. This isn't a matter of 'method' and it might not be the same for everyone. But as we encounter these moments they open out onto the inherent liveliness of ethnography. And as we explore their reverberations, some of them find their way into the finished work, to be embedded in and supported by the world that made them true.

The blind field is hidden, in a sense, behind the punctum. But a more familiar sense of the 'field' is also evoked by Barthes' discussion of the studium. As ethnographers we work with many studium-like fields that constitute various forms of background information. Important non-ethnographic accounts of prisons may also contain telling details, as other writers notice the same sorts of things ethnographers do. Often, however, these details do not develop, they do not fully enter the web of relationship and contradiction that ethnography can reveal. It's in the *relationship* between the sensitive point and the field—with the emphasis inevitably produced by the ethnographer's individual eye and focus—that I think we find what distinguishes our genre.

Thus, for example, as I worked on the passage marked by the box of discarded photos, I had to relinquish the over-simple notion of a separate population of the mentally ill in prison. One doesn't have to be trained in ethnography to trace out the complexity that unfolds between figure and ground. But ethnography is especially suited to support the necessary ambiguity out of which sparks of punctuation not only emerge but lend meaning and energy to the various fields they reference.

What I have said so far applies to ethnography in general. But what of *prison* ethnography? Can this figure/ground metaphor illuminate our particular challenges and opportunities? One of these is the problem identified by Wacquant: the difficulty of accessing enclosed institutions. Annette Leibing, in an article entitled *The Hidden Side of the Moon* talks about what she describes as 'the veiling of data' (2007). This can happen because of the human limitations of the ethnographer – our own blind spots and inadequacies. But in prison ethnography we encounter the 'veiling' of whole sites, complexes, forces, histories – the sense that we are in fact trying to study the hidden side of the moon. Leibing is helpful in offering a phrase (borrowed from Gendlin, 1978-1979): 'lifting out.' Our work, she says, is to lift out, to take on 'elements that are sensed as problematic' and make sense of them in their context—with that context including as much as possible what is hidden (Leibing, 2007).

This idea seems to me related to the notion of the punctum – the punctuation mark that surprisingly or inadvertently opens onto the larger field around it and also onto the blind, or hidden aspects of that field. In the face of the 'veil' that covers the US prison complex, prison researchers seem recently to be freeing themselves from traditional notions of ethnography to take advantage of small or incomplete openings. Legal services, education programmes, faith-based prisons with their eagerness to proselytise: these situations offer the detail, the specifics of individual lives, the reference points from which can be gained, little by little, a picture of the contradictions sustaining the larger complex.

I do not want to minimise the difficulties, but it does not help to simply howl at the gates – instead we need to assume that something does 'shoot out of the scene' if we can find ways to be pierced or caught by what is happening. And the very difficulties we have, our struggle with managers and restrictions, also constitute a kind of punctuation, a way we can understand a little of what it means to be in or work in a prison, to be subject to constraint ourselves.

What I have done very briefly here is point to the simultaneous breadth of our field and intensity of our experience. Bernard Harcourt (2005) notes that we encounter a 'carceral imagination' in the larger and unstable imposition of the moral order of which prison is but one aspect. Our counterbalance, our ethnographic imagination, is certainly small by comparison, but perhaps we can make our mark with it after all. ■

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