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Prison ethnography at the threshold of race, reflexivity and difference

Book section

PRISON ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE THRESHOLD OF RACE, REFLEXIVITY AND DIFFERENCE.

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Chapter Outline

This chapter considers the racialised dynamics of ethnographic research in two men's prisons in South East England. From the early scene-setting descriptions and evocations of life in a young offenders' institution and a Category C prison, to the more sustained period of immersion in everyday life inside, the unfolding research process revealed insights into the vertical (prison officer-prisoner) and horizontal (prisoner-prisoner) race and social relations in the prison field. The 'characters' of Abbott, Switch, Warwick, Jonathan and others, emerged in rounded form only through an ethnographic approach that combined processes of observation, interaction and interview. Accessed reflexively through the lens of our own diverse biographical identities, we illustrate, using several examples, the realities and multiple dimensions of contemporary racisms and how these coincide with vibrant postcolonial convivialities.

Introduction – prison identities

Our objective in this chapter is to offer some insights from a broadly ethnographic study of two men's prisons in south east England conducted between 2006 and 2008. The study sought to explore the dynamics of difference and their impact on social relations in the late modern prison. We wanted to examine the relative importance of Sykes' (1958) model of a universal prisoner collective, united by common experiences of brutalisation and degradation (the 'indigenous model'), and Irwin and Cressey (1962) and Jacobs (1975, 1977) model, who in contrast, saw identities external to the prison, including those of race and religion, informing social relations inside ('importation model'). The racialised dynamics of incarceration have been an increasingly prominent feature of western criminal justice systems (Tonry, 1994, Wacquant, 2001, Wacquant, 1999, Wacquant, 2006), most prominently in the USA, but no less significantly in England and Wales (Phillips and Bowling, 2002, Phillips, 2012). The dangers posed in the UK by racism in prison achieved wider exposure after the murder in his cell, in 2000, of the teenager Zahid Mubarek by his white cellmate in Feltham Young Offender Institution (YOI) (CRE 2003b, 2003a). This, and other revelations about ingrained racial discrimination in the criminal justice system and racial prejudice among its staff combined with new legislation that placed formal responsibilities on public bodies to promote 'good relations' (thus, *between* prisoners) and equal treatment (by prison officers *of* prisoners) between people 'of different racial groups' (NOMS, 2008).

However, despite recognition of the urgent need to address widespread racism in British society, its complex, shifting dynamics and locally specific manifestations can be challenging to conventional empirical inquiry. Our ethnographic and reflexive approach offered the opportunity to scrutinise some of these dimensions, to recognise their nuanced specificity, and to acknowledge our own identities and biographical histories as mediums through which we could understand the late modern multicultural prison.

Two prisons out of a possible 146, between them containing less than 1000 men among a total prison population of approximately 80,000, are not necessarily typical of the UK's carceral archipelago but they were most definitely revealing. Our study involved spending 3-4 days a week in conversation, interaction and observation of prisoners for eight months in each prison. Semi-structured interviews with 60 prisoners in Rochester and 50 interviews in Maidstone were

conducted, with slightly over one-half coming from informal contacts we made during the observational and interactional work, and the remainder drawn randomly from the prison roll, stratified by ethnicity, nationality and faith.

Two Prisons, the Metropole and the Garden of England

The two prisons lie just beyond the boundaries of the largest and most cosmopolitan city in Europe, the capital city of the UK and the erstwhile centre of the world's largest Empire: London. Home to over 8 million people, it is a vibrant, shouting advertisement for all the perils and pitfalls, wonders and windfalls, of globalisation. It is the archetype metropole. Both prisons are in the county of Kent, commonly referred to by the tourist industry as 'the garden of England'. For the many men from London and its surrounding counties who serve their sentences in HMYOI Rochester or HMP Maidstone, the distinction between urban metropole and rural idyll, minority ethnic multiculture and white monoculture, is a sharp one. For prisoners it is a distinction experienced not through the contrasting landscapes of the physical environment, as it might be by the casual visitor, the tourist or ourselves as researchers, but in the characteristics of the prisoners themselves. Their habitus and collected dispositions are thrown together into the barren architecture of prison space where they must live together in cells and on prison landings. Up close, razor wire, metal mesh, concrete walls and iron bars look more or less the same in the city or the country, even if the sounds and the light around and above a prison's open spaces may vary. Inside each prison, we discovered it was the meeting of men's different locales, diverse histories, and cultural biographies that mattered. With their different languages, manners, voices, accents, actions, looks and silences, with their various skin colours, complexions and hairstyles the men gave us stories to tell about the multicultural prison. The juxtaposition of their being 'of London' or 'of Kent' (and/or somewhere else) but not in London or really in Kent, but in prison, was the ethnographic core of the study.

HMYOI Rochester is a prison for about 400 young men aged 17-21. It lies on the site of the original Borstal institution. Established in 1908 at the high point of British imperial ambition to ensure British masculinity remained robustly 'fit-for purpose', Borstals were correctional 'camps' for wayward young men (Earle 2011b). The Kent village of Borstal lies just above the port of Rochester on the eastern reaches of the Thames estuary. It is an area made famous by its most celebrated resident, the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens and now made retrospectively available to the world at large courtesy of a theme park, Dickens World (http://www.dickensworld.co.uk/). Rochester, and the other north Kent estuary port of Chatham, were once the gateway to London and central to its imperial trading. Now declining and marginal, they are overshadowed by Dover and Ramsgate ferry ports and the tunnel route further south connecting England to mainland Europe. The prison itself comprises a number of older brick-built, barrack-style, accommodation blocks that betray their early 20th century origin. The wider prison compound includes more modern prison facilities and is ringed with high metal mesh fences that complement the perimeter wall of the old Borstal camp. The disused outdoor swimming pool just beyond the prison officer's car park is now a gloomy relic, a reminder of the benign intentions of its patrician Edwardian founders.

By contrast HMP Maidstone sits adjacent to the remodelled centre of the market town, a stone's throw from its pedestrianized commercial hub. The river Medway runs through the town, connecting it to Rochester further downstream. It provides the town with its status as the agricultural axis point of the county of Kent, centre of the garden of England. Inside thick and

imposing white limestone walls, erected almost 300 years ago in 1740, nearly 500 men are housed in five old and more modern prison blocks. It is one of the oldest penal institutions in the UK. In the middle of the 18th century the prison reformer John Howard noted its overcrowding and poor ventilation (see also HMP Maidstone 2009). At the time of our research, at the beginning of the 21st century, the prison inspectorate issued a damning report, listing much the same, with the contemporary embellishment of a thriving trade in drugs (HMIP 2007). Towards the end of our fieldwork one wing was closed due to an outbreak of listeria.

Entering and Being in the Field: Enough About Us…?

In recent prison scholarship there has been a fruitful discussion about the value of 'tell it like it is' accounts (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) or what Rowe (2014, p.410) refers to as 'univocal realist ethnography' and analyses which privilege the role of emotions and reflexivity in the interpretation of the field and the construction of knowledge about the prison (Bosworth, 1999, Liebling, 1999, Crewe, 2009, Carlen, 2010, Phillips and Earle, 2010, Drake and Harvey, 2013, Jewkes, 2014). Given our research questions, and being primed to issues of identity, race, and multiculture, in hindsight we paid rather scant attention to questions of researcher positionality before entering the field. Our first day of fieldwork 'hanging out' with prisoners at Rochester alerted us to this omission and the implications of the polarities of our research team, with regard to race, gender, age and social class (for more on this see Phillips and Earle 2010). An early fieldnote at Rochester recorded by Coretta, a black/mixed race female researcher, of time conversing with a mixed race prisoner on B wing during association was illuminating:

> John tells me that a gov has told him about a nursery rhyme which refers to niggers and God not having time to make them white. He tells me that white prisoners tell them [minority ethnic prisoners] about how racist govs are, and they [white prisoners] don't like it either. He tells me that 'it's because they're [prison officers] from Kent. They're not from London, they don't know Miss that it's all unity and love in our [urban London] communities!" (Fieldnote (CP): 26 July 2006).

Later on the same fieldnote and the corresponding one by the co-author, Rod, a white man of middle class origin, signalled a substantive partiality in the engagement of prisoners around issues of racism from prison officers, a finding often observed in other studies (CRE 2003a, Cheliotis and Liebling, 2006, NOMS 2008, Phillips, 2012), but one which emerged differently for the two of us:

> …Almost every prisoner that I meet wants to tell me about how bad the govs are here, and particularly the minority ethnic prisoners come to tell me about their [prison officers'] racism. Are they doing the same to Rod? (Fieldnote (CP): 26 July 2006).
>
> Coretta says all the black guys are telling her stories of the racism they face in the prison from the screws. It seems very striking, that they all have the same story, and want to tell her. She asks if I am getting the same and I have to say that I'm not. My interactions seem to be rather more mundane, low key, chit chat. I am worried about this as it seems a critical point of the project, and says something about the significance of identity – mine as a white researcher, and Coretta's as someone with whom such stories are meant to register. (Fieldnote (RE): 26 July 2006)

The beauty of ethnography is that what we learn through one approach, in this case observation and interaction, may be contradicted or qualified by another approach, such as formal interviews. And indeed this was the case; our interviews revealed an array of perspectives that ranged from the infrequent but determined accusations of blatant racism by a few prisoners to more tentative suggestions about the potentially racialised sources of differential treatment, and even flat denials of the incidence of prison officer racism (for more on this see Phillips 2012). Notwithstanding, there was no getting away from the fact that Coretta's racial identity provided somewhat of a privileged access to minority ethnic (and some white) prisoners in a way which was denied Rod, as a white man, and this feature continued in Maidstone prison too. Practically this meant that more of the informal contacts who were from minority ethnic groups, and who also became interviewees, were interviewed by Coretta than by Rod.

This, of course, set up the potential problem of insiderism and outsiderism which Merton (1972) long ago believed would lead to the 'balkanisation of social science'. In its starkest forms black researchers alone are assumed to be able to access knowledge from black research participants/subjects. It holds out the promise of tapping a racialised authenticity otherwise obscured by divided and segregated societies in which race is subjectively lived (Phillips and Bowling, 2003). These idealised insider identities presume to offer black researchers a monopoly on access to a universal black experience, a singular black identity. Sobering then, are the observations of black American scholar, Winddance Twine (2000) entering the field to study race and racism in multicultural Brazil. Twine was disoriented by the force of remarks by black Brazilians who appeared to wholeheartedly endorse the cultural valorization of whiteness. She reports how unsettling it was to find her professional identity as a scholar repeatedly thrown into doubt by suggestions that she was the maid, the illegitimate sister of her white partner or even his whore. Mistakenly she had assumed a shared, diasporic, black affinity with black Brazilians of African descent, as collective victims of white supremacy, would provide her with privileged access to their experience that would be denied to a white researcher. As it turned out, Twine was a long way from having the inside track on their black subjectivity and experience.

We have learned from our experiences as a two-person research team, with self-evidently contrasting identities along the axes of race, gender and class, there can be no convenient, prescriptive conventions to guide the empirical study of race, multiculture, and racism. Certain privileges of ‘insiderism’ may be part of the mix in any research encounter or interaction, but crude binary conceptions are less helpful than intersectional ones (for more on this see Phillips and Earle, Earle 2010, 2011a, 2015; Duneier, 2004). Ironically however, the binary features of our research team, unusual in terms of Coretta’s academic seniority, mixed race ethnicity and working class background, provided significant epistemological opportunities. What concerns us are the ways these are largely overshadowed, and thus obscured, by a fatalistic accommodation with their scarcity. The social, structural and institutional barriers that reproduce an almost exclusively white, middle class academic community result in a research community ill-equipped to transcend the binaries it critiques.

Time and again we found our respective identities, in term of ethnicity and gender, throwing up ‘angles’ around which we would negotiate our research. In what follows, we present another discussion of how we encountered these differences, and considered their epistemological

implications. Focussing on our interactions with four men we examine how their identities and social relations were shaped by 'race' and ethnicity.

Abbott – a man out of time

At the start of the fieldwork in Rochester, steered by prison officers who perceived our primary research interest to be about *racism*, we were alerted to the presence of a young white man recently transferred to the prison from another in the south west of England. Abbott, we were told by prison officers, was a self-declared supporter of a far-right, neo-fascist political party, the National Front. He had a swastika tattoo on his hand. More than one prison officer suggested that Abbott would be an 'obvious choice' for interview. He seemed to be regarded with an ambiguous mixture of contempt, pity and curiosity. It was not that he was seen as a celebrity, nor even as particularly notorious, he was simply and literally marked out as a known quantity, 'a racist', because of his tattoo and open political identification with the iconic symbol of British racism – the National Front. Abbott was seen, we were told by officers, as someone out of place, in more ways than one. His transfer eastwards to HMYOI Rochester arose from his being involved in fights and disciplinary issues at other institutions, and the isolating effect of his transfers was progressively more punitive the further from his west country home he was moved. Through a combination of his own preferences and officers' assessment of his predicament, he was kept isolated from most other prisoners most of the time, for his own safety. This was consistent with data we subsequently gathered on the self-policing of overt racism by minority ethnic prisoners, and the likelihood of violent retaliation against its presence.

Was he an obvious choice for interview, as the prison officers suggested? Even as we struggled to keep an open mind about Abbott, to allow him to be as much an 'unknown quantity' as any other respondent, we could not avoid the prescriptions offered to us, or deny how our own ethnicities and biographies were inevitably implicated in the choice. We discussed our approach. Was it an unexpected opportunity to exploit to the full? How could we avoid colluding with the implication of being presented with 'a specimen'; a real, live and captive, racist case study just waiting for us to interview? How problematic, how revealing was this presentation of Abbott? As ever, in the research field, such decisions are a tangled knot of pragmatism, principle, opportunity and external constraint. We had just entered the field and were already struggling to develop a coherent interview strategy that would have to surface complex and subdued questions of ethnicity (what is it like to be white?), subjective experiences of gender (what does masculinity mean to you?) within the constraints of an austere prison regime. We resolved that it was worth Rod approaching Abbott to explain our project and ask if he would agree to be interviewed. It seemed unlikely that he would have agreed to have been interviewed by Coretta, and even if he had, we were concerned that it may not be safe to do so[1].

Rod interviewed Abbott along the lines of the semi-structured interview schedule we had laboured over for hours. As with the other nine pilot interviews we discovered how difficult it was to establish a discussion around different identities, ethnicities and masculinities, how little time we had and yet

[1] This is not meant to suggest Abbot necessarily posed a physical threat, but as we have discussed elsewhere (Phillips and Earle, 2010), Abbott epitomised the white racist bogeyman, reminiscent of figures and experiences of racism from Coretta's past. The National Front's reputation for racist violence, and open valorisation of its political efficacy, was also a consideration, and a potentially unnerving feature of the prospective interview.

how tiring and challenging our young respondents found it to engage in a two-way conversation for much more than an hour. Abbott's interview was entirely typical in that, and many other respects. After an hour and a quarter, his interest in, and energy for, the conversation was flagging and the interview concluded. What he talked about in the sections that focussed on ethnicity distilled much that we were later to find in several of our interviews with white prisoners: avoidance of ethnic others; retreat into white enclaves and a preference for mono-cultural sociality; resentment toward policies designed to address discrimination and promote equalities; open and explicit hostility to Muslims as the symbol of a collective threat (Phillips 2012).

When it came to discussing ethnicity Abbott's account included justificatory references to his political affiliations: 'I think my political beliefs are a lot different for a start…' and acknowledgement that he 'is going to sound very controversial.' To Rod, the white male interviewer, he was happy to describe his avoidance in prison of people from minority ethnic groups as being simply consistent with his behaviour outside prison and the political beliefs 'drummed into my head since I was a little boy'. It seems unlikely he would have been so candid with Coretta. What was unusual about Abbott was not so much his difference from other white men in the prison, but the explicit political register of the sentiments and views he expressed. These appeared anchored in loyalty to his family and their white rural working class community in south west England. His explicit rejection of a white British identity as being a national identity already compromised by ethnic diversity is symptomatic of the political contortions and confusions that have gripped racist and nationalist politics in the UK since the mid-1970s. Asked to identify which ethnic group he belonged to, or how he would describe himself in terms of ethnicity Abbott responded with the following:

> White British, white English, I would say, although that sounds a bit strange, but what is British? You know what I mean? That sounds a bit nasty, but that's just the way I've been brought up. I see myself as white English. The reason why I say that is because you don't know what British is. There's just so many ethnic minorities, not even minorities now, majorities should I say. They're everywhere and they never say, the African minorities, never say they're English, they say they're British, so I'd like to be separated from that. I don't wish to be too close to that. I know it's a bit controversial, but that's what I believe. I think where I come from we don't wish to even associate with any ethnic minorities, you know what I mean, we fear them… That's how I've always felt, I've been brought up like that. I've had that drummed into my head since I was a little boy. I'm not being silly now but you can probably see it yourself, there's a lot of white people trying to act black and trying to be involved in them lot, and I don't wish to get involved in that because I don't like it, I think it's wrong. I'm not saying that people shouldn't mix, they should, but not when you're trying to act like them and trying…we should have our own culture and like Muslims, they've got their own culture, we should have our own culture as well. And I think it's going downhill compared to the 50s and 60s, do you know what I mean, it's all going downhill.

In this commentary compiled from one of the first interviews we conducted in the study, Abbott quickly indicates themes we subsequently found among other interviews with white respondents and that were consistent with our fieldwork interactions. Abbott, as an 18 year-old was born in the late 1980s so his evocation of decline, of 'going downhill since the 50s and 60s' echoes the political rhetoric of Britain's nationalist politics as much as it does his own experience. The irony is that although Abbott was presented to us as a display specimen, and exceptional, his views were very

similar to many other white men's in the prisons. This bogus exceptionalism has been a consistent feature of studies of perpetrators of racist violence (Sibbitt, 1997, Ray et al., 2004, Gadd and Dixon, 2011). The difference was that Abbott had a political vocabulary and grammar for his views, and an alibi in a family aligned with the open racism and nationalism of the National Front.

In the contemporary political landscape of the UK, the National Front is an organisation long since collapsed into eccentric factions or displaced by reconstituted and politically more nimble alternatives, such as the British National Party or, more recently, the English Defence League and UKIP[2]. As such the National Front, far from mirroring the success of its similarly named French counterpart, exists more as an exotic relic, surviving on the lunatic, rural fringe of English society - a sort of rare breed farm for almost extinct political mavericks. Though Abbott's politics appeared out of place and out of time in HMYOI Rochester, his presence was offered to us as a kind of stable compass point, indicating a recognisable, and thus manageable, polarity of race. This willingness to present him as a known quantity is suggestive of anxiety over the unknown qualities of contemporary racism, the loosening of its moorings from the classical bearings of old school 'racism'.

Warwick – a man out of place

In other aspects of the fieldwork the shifting uncertainties of ethnic identification that co-exist uneasily with the legacies of history confronted Coretta with a series of dilemmas. Coretta's 'lox' (dreadlocked hair) assumed symbolic significance in the prison. This was based on their association with an emblematic form of black oppositional identity derived from Jamaican Rastafarianism (Kuumba and Ajanaku, 1998), but they were also simply an aesthetic marker of black femininity. Coretta had no intention to present herself as an authentic black liberationist or Rastafarian and her 'lox' were principally a resistant stance against chemical 'relaxing' (hair straightening) as the main method for 'managing' Afro hair. Yet, in the first week of fieldwork at Maidstone prison we met Warwick, a first-time prisoner and a Rastafarian from the Caribbean. It was immediately obvious that he was struggling to understand prison life – how he got there, how he could get in contact with his family in the Caribbean, whether he could survive on his vegan diet as the nearest approximation to Rastafarian 'ital' food, whether an appeal might help to get him out, and whether he might be vulnerable to deportation. His soft-spoken bewilderment and fear was palpable and a reminder of how the prison disorients in just the way Goffman (1961) described in *Asylums*. Any first-time prisoner might be similarly felled by such alien circumstances, regardless of their 'imported' racial identities but Warwick's pain and trauma was definitely less suppressed, less modified and more anguished than most. It was upsetting to see someone so obviously 'out of their depth' and in need of help. Over the following weeks it was noticeable that as we regularly bumped into Warwick around the prison, his attention was almost always directed at Coretta rather than Rod. Such instances of 'persistent following' of researchers by prisoners will be familiar to anyone who has done research in prisons. Sometimes believing, erroneously, that researchers offer a new opportunity to have their case heard or to act on their behalf as advocates means such interactions are not uncommon. What seemed important to understand, given the study's intentions to explore prisoners' identities, was not why Warwick sought our assistance as researchers but why he insistently chose one member of the research team and not the other. It is possible that this was gendered and that Warwick saw an approachability and willingness to listen in Coretta's femininity that he did not in Rod's masculinity, but as one of Rod's fieldnotes (4 July 2007) recorded, Warwick,

[2] United Kingdom Independence Party

on one occasion appeared 'delighted' to see her, gently breathing the word 'Rastafari!' as he passed Rod en route to seek her attention, and this seemed to indicate that ethnic identification played a significant part in this particular research relationship.

Coretta – mixed race, connected and out of place

Coretta's lox also seemed to have symbolic resonance in encounters with prison staff. During the fieldwork at Maidstone prison, Coretta established a friendly relationship with Lawrence, a British black Caribbean prisoner. 'You and me connect', he said, and whilst this connection was undoubtedly forged on the basis of more than simply race (such as age, parenthood, and an allegiance to London), a later exchange suggested once again that our racial identities were part of the mix:

> Lawrence tells me he will be happy to talk (he's not scared what he says to us) at a later date – he warns me that the officers are not happy about my presence – that they do not want prisoners talking to me, whatever they say to the contrary. The female gov has already come in to check what is going on – making it clear to prisoners perhaps that they should be careful what they say to me? He says this is particularly so as I am a dread[3]. (Fieldnote (CP): 8 July 2007)

On another occasion, Rod noted the look of mute incomprehension, even fear (dread), on the face of a white, female administrator as we both entered an open plan office and engaged with her colleague who had offered to provide some data to us. Rod noticed the woman staring past him at Coretta, and remarked later to Coretta that the sustained duration of her stare, and its perplexed focus, seemed to convey a concern about Coretta's presence in the prison, her 'blackness' an unwelcome intrusion into the almost exclusively white populated office space of the prison. This snub was personally stinging, but tellingly significant for appreciating the complexities of race in the late modern prison.

We are grateful to Rhodes (2012) for drawing our attention to Barthes' (1981) concepts of the 'punctum' and the 'studium' in a photograph which are helpful analytical insights for an ethnographer. The punctum is that part of a picture which pierces the surface of a scene to puncture our conscious- or subconscious-ness; a small but telling detail that, on being noticed, reconfigures the sense made of the whole. In this case it reminded one of us of our difference from the majority. For Coretta, the punctum – the 'accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' to quote Barthes (1981, p.49) was a forceful and uncomfortable reminder of the small distance between vibrant multicultural conviviality and brutish everyday racism. Likewise, when Asad, a British Bangladeshi prisoner at Rochester, recalled putting his name down to play pool on an officer's list, but then saw white prisoners' names being placed before him, he wondered whether this was an act of discrimination. It was a small detail in the general flux and flow of the association period, but an unsettling one that he could not dismiss.

The suspicion of hidden injuries (Sennett and Cobb 1972) inflicted with casual indifference, was reinforced by Anthony, a white British prisoner at Maidstone, who reported to Coretta overhearing

[3] Jamaican-derived patois and slang for the overt expression of 'blackness', from the aforementioned 'dreadlocks' of Rastafarianism.

white officers referring to ''fucking bastard blacks'. The routine power of prison officers to withhold access to goods and services in the prison is a disempowering commonplace of prison life, an experience inherent to life in prison and noted by many prison ethnographers (Liebling, 1999, Liebling, 2001; see also Crewe 2009; Rowe 2014), When it is couched in such a way that communicates their racialising sense of your own inherent worthlessness, their investments in your own subordinated racial status, that you can do nothing to change even though you are not a prisoner, it is even more painful. It is a shared injury, and a form of inside knowledge. As Rowe (2014) observes, for ethnographers in prison such troubling and disruptive moments can be enlightening, and that it is by attending to such moments, being committed to the details of everyday interactions and providing dense descriptions of them, that we afford ourselves the opportunity of finding punctums, and revealing hidden fields of meaning beyond the culturally familiar (the 'studium' of the whole picture). In these details, these punctums, Coretta felt the overwhelming weight of disenfranchisement which comes with the arbitrary *and* racialised exercise of power by white prison officers. As Jewkes (2014: 387) has noted, 'our personalities, histories, and emotions penetrate our research in ways that can ultimately enrich our analysis and give life, vividness, and luminosity to our writing.'

Neal – heading south and spinning

If Abbott pointed ‘due north’ on an imaginary racial compass, another of our white respondents in the pilot interviews revealed themselves to be operating ‘due south’. Neal had expressed interest in our research and his willingness to be interviewed. He was a tall, thin young white man, who talked energetically about his growing up in the outer reaches of west London. He had secured a place in the prison’s rehabilitation wing, a wing reserved for prisoners demonstrating commitment to the constructive use of their sentence, and thus rewarded with more resources and privileges, and subject to a looser regime.

The opening sections of the pilot interview schedule were designed to gather some fairly routine biographical data about where the men lived and how they had arrived at the prison. It included a question on any languages spoken and Neal responded that he spoke Hindi and Punjabi. He lived in an area of London well-known for being home to a diverse range of migrant communities, including those from Ireland, North and East Africa, the Eastern Mediaterranean, India and South-East Asia. Neal went on to explain: 'I’m half Asian and half white… My dad’s Asian and my mum’s white' and that though they were now separated he had grown up in a bilingual household and learned his father's first languages. As a result of this dual heritage he had adopted the nickname ‘Switch’ and declared himself to be 'the only white Asian who knows more about the Asian culture than Asians themselves'. Asked what ethnic group he belonged to he replied without hesitation 'I’d say I was white British, I was Asian, I was white, a white Asian, British, an Asian, British Asian, whatever you want to call it that, you know what I mean' . He went on, 'I’m white. I look white. All my friends are Asian. They don’t see me as a white person. They see me as an Asian person because they know my heritage…If I want to talk about someone, or if I’m on a bus and someone sits in front of me and I’m with my friend I’ll talk to them in our language. Otherwise I speak in English, you know what I mean. So people will see and respect me for who I am not what I look like'.

The contrast with Abbott’s refuge-seeking apologia and Neal’s assertive cosmopolitanism could not be more apparent. While one appears diminished and excluded among the already excluded, the

other claims cosmopolitan inclusion. One appears to feel abandoned and quarantined, the other embraced and engaged. Using Gilroy's (2004) work as a compass we came to recognise these polarities as melancholia and conviviality. In the latter, Gilroy suggests that among some of Britain's urban young people, race has become an irrelevance, remote from lived experience and rejected in principle. Others, however, remain haunted by race, bound into its denials of common humanity, anchored to its nostalgic hierarchies and invested in its privileges. This backward facing melancholic dread is the counterweight to a convivial multiculture surfacing in unruly patterns across Britain (Gilroy 2004). Neal and Abbott were of course much more complex and contradictory than these two brief vignettes suggest, and our subsequent fieldwork in HMYOI Rochester and HMP Maidstone revealed more of the consistencies, tensions, contradictions, morbidity and vitality that prisons capture and conceal under the dull rhetoric of punishment.

Emerging in immersion – the different sides of Jonathan

The principle value of sustained immersion in the field is that it necessarily involves using a variety of tools of observation, participation, conversation and interview - the hanging around and drifting combines with more targeted activity. In more conventional, short term, qualitative research, these techniques may be deployed but rarely will the benefit of their interplay become as apparent as it does when conducting an ethnography. In the following discussion of Jonathan's contribution to the research the various modes of interaction allowed us more insights than any single or episodic form of research would have provided.

Just as it would be wrong to characterise vertical relationships in Rochester and Maidstone between prison officers and prisoners as being singularly organised and mediated through racialization and racism, the same simplistic assumption of a white oppressor-black victim binary had to be jettisoned when exploring prisoners' horizontal relationships with each other. Returning to the compass analogy Jonathan was neither due north or south. He provided us with a variety of contributions to the research which indicated the mercurial qualities of identities.

At HMYOI Rochester a performance poetry workshop with prisoners was convened by the energetic and imaginative work of their 'writer-in-residence'. It involved inviting prisoners to add their own lyrics to musical backing tracks, and then performing them to a small audience of peers. At the final workshop the set was closed by a performance from Jonathan, a white British prisoner, who was later interviewed from the study's 'random sample'. A fieldnote of the observation of the workshop drew from earlier casual conversations with Jonathan on the wings recorded in field diaries.

> He starts with a swift talking and rhyming rap - a story, funny and anecdotal, with lots of puns. His ultra-fast-chat stylings drew from his itinerant immersion in a criminal lifeworld that extended from the ports of Kent to the suburbs of London and beyond. When finished, he is pulled back to the mike and he launches into an almost unintelligible garage rap. The delivery is so quick fire it assumes a staccato rhythm of its own, with only the occasional word recognisable. Jonathan won the contest by popular acclaim. (RE Fieldnote, 13 January 2007).

This brief insight into the vernacular currents of youth and popular culture that drift easily into the young men's prison, evokes the cultural hybridity that sociologists of race have long insisted are a characteristic feature of the changed times of late modernity (Brah, 1996, Sharma et al., 1996). The cross-fertilization and fusion of sometimes disparate cultural styles and practices represents new,

emerging, plural and hybrid identities which displace notions of fixed, closed and homogenous racial identities tied to biological origins. Jonathan, while white, and hailing from traditionally ethnically mono-cultural Kent, gained the respect of the predominantly black group of prisoners in the workshop by easily emulating the vocal and linguistic vitality of black music forms. This emulation transcended the conventions of dismissive racialising mimicry by inflecting it with his experience of deep immersion in the circuits of criminal marginality, the shadowy but vital fringe economy of port life. Not unlike white rap artist, Eminem (Armstrong, 2004) Jonathan was comfortably at ease discussing the postures and posing that accompany men's fascination with guns (and marginality). Drawing with demonstrable ease on the cachet of black cultural forms which were dominant in the prison provided a means for him to boost his status and credibility inside (Phillips 2012).

But in interview with Rod, the white researcher, Jonathan had a different story to tell, one in which racial boundaries of belonging and exclusion could all too easily be re-imposed (Nayak, 2003, Frosh et al., 2002, Hughey, 2011). The first part of his interview reflected on his bullying by black prisoners as a juvenile prisoner which led him to deny his Kent upbringing – with their taunts of 'White Boy', 'you country bwoy, country bumpkin, osty boy'. Instead he pretended to have come from Brixton, the symbolic location of black residential dominance, particularly socially and culturally. However, by the time we met Jonathan in Rochester prison he had moved onward and upward, now standing as a 'big lad', unashamed of his Kentish roots and confident in the liquidity of his cultural capital.

Below, two composite extracts from Jonathan's interview reveal a cultural hierarchy in prison and outside where black men rather than white men are considered powerful, superior and dominant. This inversion of colonial hierarchy brings confusion, uneasiness, and strained relations inside, especially for white prisoners. Even those, like Jonathan, who shift with relative ease between the two, and are adept in, and can adopt black cultural practices when it suits them, find themselves unsettled:

> black people seem to think that every white person is a mug…Because I get quite embarrassed by quite a few of the white lads being like that, coming down here just to get mugged off. Just because… it's not a racial part of it, it's just a matter of black lads look more intimidating like and they'd got dreadlocks, gold teeth, a little bit of an attitude and the way they talk. And you get a white lad and he says, 'Hello mate, are you alright?', and you get a black lad saying 'Wha Gwaan[4]! Pussy[5]!', whatever, what's it. Right, what's more intimidating? So as soon as you realise the lingo, yeah, and you understand it, I talk like that in front of them, I switch, you know, I don't even mean to do it…
>
> [Asked about his friendship groups]…I'd be with the white guys, straight up. I'm not racist or nothing like that it's just black guys will obviously respect black guys more and white guys always respect white guys more. It's nothing to do with racist or anything like that. But I believe black people are more racist than white people, and that's what I've watched. And religion-wise yeah, Muslims yeah, they are highly racist. 'You're a Cafar', that means a non-believer, yeah. So if you're a Cafar I will not talk to you. So that's highly racism in my book yeah…I had an argument like the other day yeah, but it was behind closed doors like, a couple of cells up. And the kid said I looked like Elvis, we were having a laugh

[4] Jamaican patois for 'What's going on'?
[5] Derogatory reference to female genitalia

> and a joke through the pipes and that, 'you look like fucking Elvis'. I said, 'you're funny mate' [unclear– 00:23:13], you know having a laugh with him. I said, 'you look like Side Show Bob[6]' mate, you know, coming back to him, then 'fuck you I don't joke with white boys', you know what I mean. I said, 'why are you bringing the racial issue like?' And I can talk like that you know, because I like arguments, I enjoy it you know, I've got a good opinion on it yeah. And I said, 'fuck it mate you're like Aladdin[7] mate,' you know, not racial, and he said, 'why you being racist?' … and then my [person] next door was stirring him up, he says 'oh you've got a magic carpet and you've got a monkey as a best friend' and all this. I said 'no mate, I didn't say that mate'. He said, 'you're racist, you're racist like, fucking you Cafar', and all this like. I was like, 'No mate'.

In this extract the racial compass is spinning, and being spun with malicious intent. The reported conversation travels quickly from the benign to the racialised, the personal to the collective, as other prisoners start to involve themselves in its rising tempo. The episode reveals the continually negotiated context of race in late modern culture, the stress and strain of doing so and its disorienting ambiguity (Phillips 2008). In this reported exchange there are mocking references to features of the Disney cartoon, Aladdin; a magic carpet, and a monkey. These film references are themselves imbued with racial stereotype, with Disney studios notorious for reproducing narrow, stereotypical characterisations of Arabic people and culture. The film is populated with characters who are more than literally two-dimensional. Among the 'barbarian' types, the treacherous thieves and belly-dancers, rise the heroes, lighter skinned and overtly Americanised. The principal villain, Jafar, is darkest skinned of all. Here, a children's cartoon becomes loaded ammunition, improvised, explosive and disruptive. Jonathan's identification of Muslims as the 'most racist' signals how they have assumed the position of black people in the 1970s and 1980s as a popular target for racialization (see Earle and Phillips 2012).

As in every research enterprise leaving the field means leaving things behind, discovering missing pieces and gaps you would like to fill. Even though ethnography takes, and makes, more from the field than most research processes, the gaps and missing pieces in this account are frustrating. We don't know of whom Jonathan is speaking. We don't know why his interlocutor is stung by the allusion to Sideshow Bob, though presumably the hair is a clue, a large afro-style. The rapid escalation and the turn to conflicted ambiguities of racialization are sharp. Jonathan's reaction is defensive and quickly invests in the new hate-figure of the Muslim. It is a far cry from the harmonious switching described by Neal, but also a long way from Abbots embattled muteness and nostalgic retreatism.

Con-viviality, new ethnicities and confliction

One of the remarkable features of prison life is its peculiar combination of torpor and vitality, mixing, clustering and segregation. We have adapted Gilroy's (2004, 2005) ideas about conviviality to accommodate this prison concocted 'con-viviality' of which Jonathan's performance poetry is a prime example, but underlying this are more unstable, brittle relationships between prisoners of different ethnic origins. The diversity of the multicultural prison is a contested one, shifting and unpredictable in its balance between racialised hostility, white retreatism and ethnic presence.

[6] From The Simpsons US cartoon series, a criminal character, 'white', and known for his large head of eccentrically curly hair

[7] An explicitly ethnic reference to the person's non-white identity

Indeed, Hall (1987) puzzled over this paradoxical dynamism in 1987 as he began formulating the 'new ethnicities' paradigm. How is it, he asked, 'that young black people in London today are marginalised, fragmented, unenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory.' That we should encounter something so similar in HMYOI Rochester and, to a slightly lesser extent, HMP Maidstone is indicative of the enduring power and continuing appeal of Hall's work.

In fact, we are writing this chapter shortly after the death of Stuart Hall, *the* pre-eminent black scholar of our times. Hall's (1991/2000) ground-breaking work on 'new ethnicities' has been a powerful influence on our thinking. His analysis and propositions around new ethnicities exist in considerable tension with the once dominant forms of national identification that characterised colonial modernity. These were the privileged birth-right of the white bourgeoisie (and in the trickle down, the white working class too). Unquestioned and invisible until relatively recently, these white identities are not easily or happily exchanged for the contingencies and uncertainties of ethnicity. Naidoo (2000) notes that being the racial 'other' and embracing an ethnicity that jostled 'the difference between nationality, ethnicity, language and political affiliation' was a difference 'learned as children' by his generation. The familiarity of determining a sense of self, or presenting one on demand, from shifting repertoires is, suggests Naidoo (2000: 79) relatively banal for him, but for his white 'English counterparts [who] took it for granted that their cultural identities held no such conflicts', it is a hard lesson, a lesson too far, or a lesson they refuse to learn. Naidoo suggest that for his white English friends difference is resented because ethnicity is something others do or have. Thus, for Anglo-white people in the fragmenting realities of the United Kingdom, national identity no longer offers them a tacit but stable reference point for their sense of self. Reluctant to locate themselves in the ambiguities of ethnicity, the white English feel homeless, an experience that echoes harshly back at them in the arid landscapes of a prison. This is the post-imperial melancholia that is vividly portrayed in Gilroy's book *After Empire*. In our prison study then, Abbott is poorly-equipped to manage his encounter with this new world of new ethnicities. In a multicultural world Abbott has no compass to guide him but drifts with the melancholic phantasms of his parent's identification with the National Front. Other white men in the prison, such as Neal with more experience of living with 'no nation but the imagination' (Walcott, 1986), find it easy enough to position themselves in a sliding scale between Asian, British and English. Some like Jonathan are confident of their bearings, but uncertain of the horizon, sensing 'that immense process of historical relativisation which is beginning to make the British, at least, feel just marginally marginal' (Hall 1987:45) but unsure of where it leaves him.

Hall (1978) is best known among a criminological readership for *Policing The Crisis*. Interestingly, Campbell (2013) points out how frequently it is overlooked that the defining incident of *Policing The Crisis*, the 'mugging' in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, involved 'three boys of mixed ethnic background' and that the victim was an older white Irishman. One of the boys sentenced to over ten years in prison for the 'mugging' was himself a young Irish migrant, and each of the three 'muggers' had 'diasporic backgrounds: Irish, Caribbean and Turkish (Farred 2010:264). As the text established itself as a landmark in the analysis of crime, order and social control, the complex ethnic dynamics so central to the new ethnicities framework have been traduced to the familiar dyad of black and white: 'a robbery initiated in Handsworth by three black youths on an elderly white victim' (Hallsworth, 2005: 85). Campbell's article challenges the specific erasure of the Irish in Britain from such accounts, and connects it to particular formations of Anglo-whiteness that narrow the empirical

gaze. Significantly, for our purposes here, Campbell (2013) also draws attention to the potential impacts of research personnel and the ethnic composition of academic research communities. They impact on what becomes known, and how it becomes known (see also Phillips and Bowling 2003; Phillips and Earle 2010, Earle 2015). Tellingly, in the follow-up publication to *Policing the Crisis*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (CCCS, 1982), Gilroy acknowledges the influence of the ethnic mix of the research centre in setting research agendas and shaping research methodologies. For Gilroy the unevenness of their text in relation to the experiences of Britain's South Asian communities was directly attributable to the fact that 'only one of us has roots in the Indian subcontinent whereas four of us are of Afro-Caribbean origin' (see also Modood, 1994). Hall's work and the implications of a new ethnicities paradigm involves recognising that everyone 'speaks' from certain places and histories, not just 'minorities'. This is particularly challenging if you are of the majority, more accustomed to speaking from nowhere and in generalities, which is frequently the case if you are a man, middle-class and/or Anglo-white. In subsequent critical reflections on how some experiences 'count' while others remain peripheral Gilroy (cited in West , 1992:701) elaborates on the theme, 'It's probably got to do with who owns and manages and controls the spaces in which such discussions appear, and the particular definition of race politics they want to trade in.' The idea of trading in 'race politics' challenges us to think about which voices count in the academy and in our host discipline.

For every African Caribbean male undergraduate at a Russell Group University, there are three African Caribbean men aged 18-24 in prison. In this age group, 7% of the prison population is made up of African Caribbean men, but they constitute only 0.1% of the undergraduate population of Russell Group universities (Sviensson 2012). This makes it quite unlikely that researchers going into prisons are going find themselves contending with the kind of dilemmas of ethnic (mis)recognition and (mis)identification that we have found to be such a stimulating aspect of our ethnography, because the researchers are likely to be white. Writing through these experiences as a two-person research team composed of contrasting identities has provided a particular kind of reflexive ethnography, perhaps more open to difference by being different, but hopefully not unique.

Closure

The racialised dynamics of late modern, multicultural prisons are bound to be diverse and cannot be ignored. One of the beauties of ethnography is its insistence on the specificity of its craft. The ethnography outlined here, and in other writings, does not tell the whole story of English prisons. We have been in two prisons in south east England. The men in these prisons encounter race, racism and ethnicity and give them shape in varying degrees of intelligibility. There are struggles taking place over their respective meanings, inside the prison, in wider society and in our own lives. Ethnography's anthropological origins means that it is rarely seeking causes, especially not those that so energetically animate criminology and penology. Its defining and distinctive mission is to render more intelligible the many ways of being human in the world. It involves listening to people, seeing what they do, attempting to feel what they feel, and hear what they say. It thereby creates an implicit politics of affinity. Prison ethnography, thus practiced, embraces radical alterity, an open-ness to otherness (Hage 2010, 2012). Our prison ethnography sheds some light on those struggles, and offers resources that they might be rendered more adequate to the full breadth of human potential.

Further Reading

1. **The Multicultural Prison – Ethnicity, Masculinity, and Social Relations among Prisoners, Oxford University Press, 2012, Coretta Phillips**
2. **After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?, Routledge, London, 2012, Paul Gilroy**
3. **The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia, London. Routledge. Eds Joanna Overing and Alan Passes.**

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