

## **Re-‘homing’ the ex-offender: Constructing a ‘prisoner dyspora’**

Despite the often peripheral locations of prisons, the interlinkages between society and spaces of incarceration are numerous and complex. Much geographical literature has sought to overturn the presumption of a ‘closed-off’ world of the prison, illustrating how the policies and practices that animate prisons go beyond the physical boundary of the prison wall (Baer and Ravneberg 2008; Gilmore 2007; Loyd et al. 2009; Pallot 2005; Vergara 1995; Wacquant 2001 2009). Ignoring this symbiotic relationship serves to ‘hide’ the crucial role of the penal system in contemporary society. Indeed, Peck (2003) and Gilmore (1999 2007) recognise that the prison system has become a key component of a state-based strategy of regulating a potentially unruly urban poor, or often used as a recession-proof economy (Bonds 2006; Dyer 2000; Lemke 2001; Neumann 2000; Venn 2009).

Related to this, recidivism in the UK is of serious concern, with over a third of those released from prison re-convicted within the first year<sup>1</sup> (Ministry of Justice 2011, 3). Thus, the prison wall can easily be posited as a kind of border, with both migrants and returnees crossing in both directions for different lengths of time. Drawing on pertinent literature surrounding ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’, this paper attends to the hybridity of ex-offender constructions of ‘home’ and how they might be conceptualised as a ‘prisoner dyspora’. Here, I illustrate the strong ties to prison and its problematic relationship with the high levels of recidivism that Britain is currently experiencing. This paper argues that although ex-offenders may idealise a return to the communities where they lived prior to incarceration, the ability to re-integrate is often limited owing to the transformations individuals undergo following imprisonment, such as the possession of a criminal record. In the following section, I focus upon geographical conceptualisations of ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’ before considering these in relation to the

specific context of prisoners. Grounding this discussion in the case of a company that employs ‘ex-offenders’, I examine the implications of belonging to a group of ‘conventional employees’ *and* ‘those with criminal records’; revealing tensions that complicate matters of belonging.

### **Geographies of ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’**

In recent years, geographies of home have become theorised as both material and symbolic, located on the threshold between past memories, the everyday present and future dreams and fears (Blunt and Varley 2004). In similar vein, Baer (2005) has illustrated the manner in which prisoners ‘decorate’ their cells with items considered mundane in the ‘outside’, in order to provide a material link to the non-prison world. Similarly, for migrants, the desire to pin down identities to a fixed home provides a stable sense of self in a world characterised by flux (Conway 2005). This flux is intrinsic to my on-going research surrounding the relationship, and more specifically the ‘boundary traffic’ between prison and society (Turner, 2013).

Following these tensions, scholars now problematise home as a fixed entity or physical dwelling place (Brettell 2006; Datta 2010). Instead, it is linked to local networks and communities, or even national identities through ideologies and practices with both humans and non-humans (McDowell 1997; Jacobs and Smith 2008; Miller 2001). Home is also a threshold-crossing concept, traversing boundaries across time/space. It is therefore messy, mobile, blurred and confused (Ahmed et al. 2003; Nowicka 2007). For Ralph and Staeheli, “the challenge ... is to conceptualise the simultaneity of home as sedentary and as mobile” (2011, 518). Thus, the concept of home can be both dynamic *and* moored – a location, or a set of relationships that shape identities and feelings of belonging. This ambiguity about

‘home’ has been well researched, positing the possibility of multiple homes (Constable 1999; Ní Laoire 2007 2008a 2008b).

However, just as home should not be presumed to be singular, identity should not be presumed to be the same (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 521). Recent work considers the generation of ‘hybrid’ identities (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Walter 2006; Yau 2007). Fluid, fragmented or partial identities do not exclude the desire for an integrated, whole and stable identification with home (Varley 2008; Young 1997). Home, therefore, incorporates both a lived and longed for state (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 522). This, as this paper suggests, is of particular interest when we consider penal spaces, and the generation of a hybrid attachment to both prison and the outside community that prisoners are released into. Recent work within a carceral setting notes particularly how prison may constitute a positive place of friendship (Caine 2006); or generate a hybrid form of prisoner citizenship (Turner 2012).

Similarly, diaspora studies has undergone a period of intense flux in the last decade following conceptual trends stimulated by the ‘cultural turn’, drawing out the spatialities and temporalities of diasporic experience (Christou and King 2010; Featherstone et al. 2007; Ní Laoire 2003). Diaspora has come to be known as “a scattering of people over space and transnational connections between people and places” (Blunt 2009, 158). Beyond the traditional description of the forced dispersal of Jews from Palestine, diaspora studies now encompass other notions of migration, connections and attachments to place – reflecting ‘new ethnicities’ research which explores diaspora alongside such things as gender, class and sexual spaces (Ní Laoire 2003, 278). Importantly for this discussion, academics have also attended to the ‘hybridity of diaspora’ (Hall 1990), particularly if migration is neither unidirectional nor permanent (Ralph and Staeheli 2011); with the existence of both diverse

and multiple homes, as well non-fixed allegiance and belongings being explored (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Ní Laoire 2003). Upon considering these complexities, Mavroudi theorises diaspora as ‘process’ whereby space, place and time are non-static; can be either bounded or unbounded; and continually (re)imagined (2007, 473). Following this, the next section of this paper attends to one particular case study in which the duality of ex-offender relationships with home is exemplified. When engaging with this particular population (the ‘prisoner’) we acknowledge a plethora of novel power relationships that ensue as this quite particular boundary between ‘home’ and ‘carceral’ space is crossed (and often blurred). This is a boundary different to that crossed by other populations - in scale, legality, expectation, etc. – meaning that the prisoner allows us to move away from typical diasporic populations studied, in order to unravel the numerous scales, the differing boundaries and multiple power-space geometries that operate when different types of people move across and between variously defined territorial/legal borders.

This consideration of prisoners as a diasporic population fits with emerging literature, which has led to a variety of putative diasporas such as the ‘gay diaspora’ or the ‘deaf diaspora’. However, for Brubaker, the dispersal of the original concept has and resulted in the creation of a ‘diaspora’ diaspora, which poses problems if the terminology becomes “stretched to the point of uselessness” (2005, 3). In light of this, it is easy to criticise the conceptualising of a ‘prisoner diaspora’ – what could simply be another putative diaspora. In response to this, I explore the unwanted, or a less than ideal, relationship with the prison as home, based on the lack of ability to re-integrate with the community that prisoners re-enter. This dystopian existence results in the creation of what I term the ‘prisoner dyspora’. This responds directly to the current call for attention to the value of perspectives from cultural geography in

attending to the nuance space of the prison, and in drawing out their significance “to open up the political at a more ‘personal’ level” (Turner 2013, 35).

### **Re-‘homing’ ex-offenders: the case of Blue Sky**

In order to ground this discussion, I draw upon recent interviews I conducted with facilitators and employees of UK-based company Blue Sky Development and Regeneration, in the Wakefield branch located in West Yorkshire in England. Interviews were carried out in the workplace with participants who had volunteered and been selected by the company themselves<sup>2</sup>. Conversations were taped, with permission from the interviewee, and later transcribed and coded using the key themes of the wider prisons project – namely penal spaces, penal identities, rehabilitation, and constructions of ‘home’ (either on the ‘inside’ or the ‘outside’). Participants’ names have been anonymised, although the case study has not. Blue Sky requested their identification owing to the company setting a precedent for other ex-offender-employment-schemes, and interviewees agreed to be anonymised in conjunction.

Blue Sky tenders for commercial contracts from soft-landscaping (designing elements of a landscape such as fencing and planting) through to recycling and ground-working (digging foundations and other under-support for various types of structures) and reinvests income into providing six-month contracts specifically for those with a criminal record who are involved with their local Probation Trust. Originally designed as a rehabilitative project, Blue Sky has developed into a profitable company, with schemes such as recycling plants generating annual profits for the Local Authority of £120,000. Importantly, alongside the work experience, employees are supported in CV-building and given opportunities to do training courses ranging from construction-machinery operation to building-site safety, each costing as much as £800 per person.

In their first 18 months, Blue Sky Wakefield aided 19 ex-prisoners to successfully finish their employment contract. What is overwhelmingly apparent from those who I spoke to, is the definite ethos of care and future wellbeing that is promoted by the project. Facilitators highlighted the main aim to be getting employees onto the first rung of the ladder to a stable routine of work and earning a steady income – a package attractive enough to prevent reoffending.

### **Locating ‘home’ in liberal society**

Gaining paid employment is highly significant in helping ex-offenders reintegrate into society outside of prison. My interviewees recognised that contributing to tax, national insurance and paying their way, rather than society paying for them, all contributed to their process of normalisation. Barke (2001) noted the emotional importance of dwelling in a private, domestic property – allowing individuals freedom from the critical gaze of society. In a similar way, employment generates an ability to achieve both the assimilation into the mechanisms of capitalism, *and* gain the respect of family members through the wages it provides. As the employees explain:

**Ben:** It makes it look better, doesn't it, when the family's saying "what are you doing now?"

**Steve:** ... Yeah, cause you can say "yeah I'm working now" ... Instead of saying, "oh yeah, [nothing], just the usual on the dole, sat at home".

**Chris:** Yeah it gives you that image that you're going out and working I think...

**Rich:** You feel better within yourself as well ... looked up to by my missus and my baby ...

The impact that positive family relationships can have in reducing recidivism is widely attended to by both scholars across a variety of disciplines (Comfort 2002 2008; McGarrell and Hipple 2007) and official reports (Her Majesty's Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation

2001; Home Office 2004 2006). Once solid links exist they can be major contributors to severing all ties with prison. Mills and Codd (2008) find that families generate 'resourceful social capital', which can help forge positive links with liberal society – particularly useful when finding gainful employment (Farrall 2004). 25-year-old Ben had spent nine years in and out of prison. He (like two of his colleagues) believes that the birth of his first child changed the pattern:

... now I've got a kid, this time I went to prison all I could think about was I'd let her down. I wouldn't like to go to prison now ... you're just sat there with [nothing] to do and all you're doing is thinking and the only thing that kept coming into my head was my daughter ... thinking I wanted to go home because I wanted to see her, and I wouldn't want to go again just to have that gut feeling again because it was horrible.

Thus for most, the return to prison is undesirable. Chris believes he has found a better life outside of it and is motivated by the desire to perform his obligations to this family. After a string of cautions, he finally received a prison term, which he claims, has scared him. However, he worries that the relationships he has built up post- release would be destroyed if he were to be incarcerated again:

I was scared shitless to be honest ... I don't want to go back. Part of me going to jail was for pinching from [a supermarket] and my girlfriend's mum got me the job ... she hasn't spoken to me for like 12 months and now we go to her house ... now, I'm building up a better relationship with her part of the family ... if I went back to jail it would be for them to think "what are you doing with him?"

This reinforces the notion of ex-offenders experiencing a dis-satisfaction with their attachments to prison. These unwanted connections render relationships with prison dystopian. Indeed, arrival back to the prison 'home' may be frequent for some. One of the biggest barriers to re-integration with the outside community is the possession of a criminal record, which, much like the passport or birth certificate, is a telling reminder of time spent in

a particular place. Rich here highlights the problem of holding a criminal record, and the fact that it will likely always have a bearing upon the ease with which an individual is given a return journey back inside – the other world that Rudesind (2006) has referred to as ‘Prisonland’.

The problem is, once you’ve been to prison, the judge is really quick to send you back ... Someone who gets in a fight with you in a nightclub, to him it’s just a fight, he’ll get a smack on the wrist, but to you it’s prison ... That’s the problem we’ve got ... You don’t realise you’re doing it but you’re doing it in your head ... always thinking of what the consequences are going to be.

Furthermore, with many jobs in the UK requiring a criminal records check, the offence is likely to render this reminder to the past a permanent one. My interviewees described Blue Sky’s workplace, where disclosure was one of the eligibility requirements, as one where the common ground was welcoming. No-one was forced to lie to anyone, as both employees and facilitators are aware of individuals having spent time in prison. Ben and Rich also commented upon the negative treatment they had when visiting the Job Centre to claim their Job Seeker’s Allowance, and their difficulty in finding:

**Rich:** They treat you like you’re trashy on that Job Seekers’ ...

**Ben:** ... you go in and they just talk down to you. They know you’re on the dole, they know ... you’re getting your money for [nothing] ... They really belittle you and talk down to you ...

**Rich:** And they always say to you “Why haven’t you found a job, there’s all these jobs out there?” ... but you apply for hundreds and hundreds of jobs and they don’t understand that not every job you are going to get.

In view of societal prejudices against former prisoners (particularly those that fail to secure employment) it is clear that the individuals themselves identify these attachments as ones they would rather not maintain. We note here that social processes of inclusion and exclusion critically depend on the categorisation of people as belonging and non-belonging (Ralph and

Staheli 2011, 523). However, this categorisation is less about the subjective feelings of the individual and more about the powerful saying who belongs (Castles and Davidson 2000; Crowley 1999; Ilcan 2002). Drawing upon Probyn (1996), ex-offenders clearly exist between two interrelated states that together define belonging: that of 'be'-ing, and that of 'longing'. There is a definite antagonism between the actual and idealised meaning of home (Ralph 2009). It is unsettling for those released from prison to discover that they may no longer belong in the place they always called their *home*. Thus, the reality of life outside prison may be far from the one that was dreamt about; forcing ex-offenders "to revise their self-identities and articulate a liminal status as both insiders and outsiders" (Ralph and Staheli 2011, 523).

### **'Prisonland' - a less than desirable home**

In the next section of the paper, I draw attention to the way that ex-offenders experience attachment to prison, which results in further inability to forge positive links with the communities they are released into.

[Insert table 1 – portrait]

Table 1: Prison reception and discharge figures (England and Wales, quarter ending Sept 2011) Figures sourced: Ministry of Justice (2011)

According to figures from the Ministry of Justice, in the quarter ending September 2011, over 32,000 first-time receptions were made to the prison system in England and Wales (see Table 1). During this same time, there were also nearly 22,000 offenders discharged from determinate sentences. Of those, 2,500 had served more than four years in prison. This means that, in addition to the prison/society relationship being highly fluid with numerous networks, there is a large number of people re-entering society having spent a significant time

incarcerated within the specific prison lifestyle. Hayner and Ash (1939) illustrate the informal rules created by inmate hierarchies, or gang allegiances, which exist alongside those of the administration. Other attachments may include adhering to prison jargon, which often becomes a subconscious activity (Fox 1999). They might become part of the system of supply and demand, where everyday objects such as the foil in sweet wrappers become valuable trading commodities due to their alternative use as aids in drug-taking (Valentine and Longstaff 1998). This 'inside' world soon becomes a domestic regime, a way of life, and in many cases a 'home'.

For some, the ambivalence towards the prison environment is clear. Ben described how he settles fairly easy into the routine of prison life, always easily achieving the most sought-after jobs, and learning to do what was necessary to "make it look good". The former-prisoners are quick to recognise the leniencies of the prison environment, with one describing it as "a boarding school where you just don't get to go home at the weekend". In fact, when asked about his feelings on re-incarceration, Ben admitted that missing his daughter and losing his job would be the only downside. Harman et al. (2007), for example, use evidence sourced from wives of incarcerated prisoners who are affronted and dismayed at the degree of free time and relaxation that their partners enjoy when in prison, at precisely the time when they are having to manage both the family finances and the children themselves. There is also recognition of the fact that some of the people who have experienced prison have found it to be less harsh than their original pre-conceptions. It is true that prisoners receive basic needs, such as shelter and food, but may also be offered opportunities not enjoyed by some people on the 'outside', such as enhanced access to education (Cohen 2012) or a social network that they might lack elsewhere (Howerton et al. 2009). May and Woods (2005) demonstrate that

many American prisoners would prefer to go to prison than do community service, house arrest or 'boot camp' when offered the choice.

It seems that ex-prisoners are torn. As discussed earlier in the paper, prisoners may have families on the outside, often aiding their re-integration into liberal society. However, the friendships or 'families' that are often metaphorically created in prison can also be strong – particularly for those with dysfunctional upbringings and other difficulties with their biological kin. This sense of ambiguity develops when prisoners exhibit a sense of allegiance with the other inmates. Bronson (2008) observed the intense friendships that are forged within prison, with commonalities provided by previous occupations, religions, birthplace or hobbies. These friendships also become intensified by the close contact of the penal environment, facilitating relationships as strong as familial ties:

**Jake:** Three or four guys in here I consider almost like blood brothers. Like they're real relatives. I know I could tell them anything, show them any side of me, whatever. (Bronson 2008, 79)

This sense of belonging is something I explored with my interviewees insofar as it makes Blue Sky something of a nurturing environment; its employees can remain within the comfort blanket of likeminded people for the daunting and often-difficult first six-months after release. Rich comments:

... there just seems to be something between people, because they've done the same kind of thing ... it's not like we start a new job and everyone's law abiding citizens and none of them have seen police unless they've phoned 'em, we're all the same so when we come to this job ... you know that he's been in prison and he has, so you feel comfortable ...

Unlike conventional ideas of diaspora, the sense of belonging created is one of shared place and experience, rather than through birth-rite or ethnicity. Similar situations where men 'bond' through shared performance have been explored, such as time spent in the military (Atherton 2009; Barrett 2001; Hockey 1986). This attitude of creating a shared sense of place, and indeed a tolerance towards people from different backgrounds is something that the ex-prisoners themselves have found highly useful in their everyday working life, particularly when they talked about their ease at forging friendships in the workplace, not only amongst their ex-offender peers at Blue Sky, but with people more generally:

**Chris:** We're coming from all walks of life.

**Rich:** When you go to prison you get to know people and you get used to people coming and going, you've got to be polite and ... you've got to talk to people so when you get here ... it's easy.

**JT:** So do you think that's prison that's made you like that?

**Rich:** Well yeah, because you've got to ... when you go into a wing, you don't know anyone on that wing and unless you talk to people, it's going to be a boring time isn't it?

### **No place like home: the 'prisoner dyspora'**

The relationships between prison and society highlighted by the Blue Sky case study are just one of many avenues of interest, which render geographies of 'home' and diaspora a vibrant and changing arena. It is clear that the case of the ex-offender exhibits intriguing similarities to the way migrants form attachments to the different places they occupy. During incarceration, prisoners' identities often transform in a variety of ways resulting in ambivalence upon return to the 'outside' world. In some cases, these attachments are constituted by positive attributes such as the development of friendships and other social skills within prison. However, for most, stigma or the presence of a criminal record merely create unwanted boundary maintenance and forced solidarity between ex-offenders and the rest of liberal society. What this results in is the generation of dual 'homes', neither of which

the ex-offender successfully belongs to. This unsettling sense of self may result in an inability to continually exist within the law, ultimately forcing a return to prison. This dystopian relationship results in ex-offenders having no solid allegiance with their desired place of 'home' - existing as a 'prisoner dyspora'.

Those like Blue Sky recognise the support of peers that ex-offenders may subconsciously require during a period in their lives where a sense of 'home' might be ambiguous. Trapped between the place that they want to belong to and the one that binds them, the time spent in prison may indeed render them ever more absent from the societies they are released into, with their 'prison homeland' remaining ever present in their everyday lives. The sentiment is worrying, as one interviewee commented:

“Prison has totally changed me ... but, deep down, you can never really leave”.

In addition, however counter-intuitive they seem, prisoners and ex-prisoners may hold positive attitudes to prison, and this should be recognised by key agents in the penal system in order to produce a “person-centered approach to supporting resettlement” (Howerton et al. 2009, 458). In this way, perhaps paying attention to the hybridity of both 'home' and prisoner-migrant may facilitate the transition from 'inside' to 'outside' more effectively.

## Notes

- 1 39.3% of adults committed offences in a one year follow-up period and were convicted within the follow up period or a further six month waiting period.
- 2 Original intentions were to recruit participants from those currently incarcerated within UK institutions to research prisoner attachment to 'home'. However, due to the legal and ethical issues surrounding access to this environment – chiefly the prisoners' inability to

give non-coerced informed consent - this paper uses empirical evidence obtained from approaching several companies that employ ex-offenders. Although the company does employ female ex-offenders, participants were all male.

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