A Wall Is Just a Wall:  
Prison Writing, Carceral Grammar, and the Abolitionist Imagination

MLA 2014 Panel: Prison Abolition in Twentieth-Century American Autobiographical Writing

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Although the call to abolish prisons is often thought of as emanating from the anti-institutionalization movements and New Left politics of the 1960s, it can also be heard (on various registers) in the prison literature of the early-twentieth-century US. Much of the criticism leveled at the prison during this period by incarcerated writers was reabsorbed by the “New Penology,” with its promise of rationalized, humane, and therapeutic prisons. Some of these critiques, however, proved harder to coopt than others—and not always the ones we might expect. Despite their explicit condemnation of incarceration, some Progressive-era prison abolitionists can be seen acquiescing to the state’s logic of carceral violence, whereas others (who do not emphasize abolition) undercut that logic quite powerfully in their attacks on carceral capitalism. What distinguishes these two groups lies not in the familiar distinction of “reformist” vs. “radical,” but rather in the meaning that these prison writers ascribe to prison walls. How absolute is the division between freedom and captivity these walls enact? To what extent does the wall enclose and engender a world apart? In questioning the prison’s capacity to delineate where freedom begins and ends, some of these authors sidestep denunciation of the prison-as-institution to attack incarceration’s imaginative underpinnings, the habits of thought produced by and supportive of imprisonment itself. In so doing, they disrupt what I am calling the state’s “carceral grammar.”

For some writers, prison walls themselves constitute the heart of the problem, in that they create the hellish underworld that they also contain. In 1912, after a decade in
California’s San Quentin, Donald Lowrie published his bestselling *My Life in Prison*. Lowrie condemns the excessive violence of the state’s prison system, particularly its horrific use of straight jackets and solitary confinement. While Lowrie calls for making prisons less brutal and more “constructive,” he nonetheless gestures toward the possibility of a world without prisons. Criticizing a planned prison expansion of more than 1,500 beds, he asks, “Will an additional 1,500 be desirable? It is not new cells that are required, but a new system without cells” (420).

Julian Hawthorne makes a similar (although more intense) abolitionist appeal in his *Subterranean Brotherhood*, published in 1914. Son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Julian served a year in Federal prison for mail fraud, during which he became an ardent opponent of incarceration. Decrying its inhumanity, costliness, and failure to prevent crime, Hawthorne insists that the prison is a “despotic” and “primitive device,” unsuited for the civilized society that stubbornly deploys it (299). He attributes prisons’ persistence to: “the thought in a man's heart that he is better … than his fellow” (305). Hawthorne’s abolitionist vision rests upon a Christian appeal to brotherly love. For both him and Lowrie, citizens on the outside must recognize their shared humanity with prisoners—only compassion can overcome the divide between free and unfree.

For other incarcerated writers of this period, however, the worlds within and beyond the wall are not quite so alien to each other. For socialists like Jack London, the prison clearly played a role in the raging class struggle of the turn-of-the-century US. London recounts his cross-country travels as a teenager, when he encountered an army of dispossessed and exploited men and women whose years of labor did nothing to save them from what he calls the “social pit” (274). Disillusioned with his individualistic
beliefs, the young London resolves to avoid work altogether, and is soon imprisoned for vagrancy. This first-hand experience of the penitentiary’s function of controlling workers inaugurates London’s political education: “Since that day I have opened many books,” he writes, “but no economic argument … affects me as profoundly and convincingly as … when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me” (278). London also describes how the economic exploitation of the larger world permeates life in the penitentiary.

London was one of thirteen “trustees” appointed to rule over the 500 other prisoners. In a 1907 memoir, he frankly admits his own complicity in extorting other inmates. “We were economic masters inside our hall,” London explains, “We controlled the food-supply of the population, and just like our brother bandits outside, we made the people pay through the nose for it” (101).

Political prisoners like Kate Richards O’Hare and Alexander Berkman echoed this kind of analysis. In his 1912 *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Berkman recounts his fourteen years in prison for an attempted assassination. He describes how diverse forms of struggle and violence inside the prison recapitulate those on the outside: from guards’ brutality to escape conspiracies to internecine spying, snitching, and other betrayals. “Daily I behold the machinery at work,” he writes, “grinding and pulverizing, brutalizing the officers, dehumanizing the inmates. Far removed from the strife and struggle of the larger world, I yet witness its miniature replica, more agonizing and merciless within the walls” (273). For Berkman, the prison is separated, “far removed” from the larger world, but nonetheless subject to the same forms of conflict, repression and resistance seen elsewhere. He argues that the apparent disconnect between technological progress and the persistence of cages and chains belies modern society’s dependence on brutality. Having
dedicated his memoir to “all those in and out of prison who fight against their bondage,”
Berkman ends it with the hope that readers will be awakened by the cries of prisoners to
an appreciation of the “misery and suffering in the world beyond” (458).

Kate Richards O’Hare, a political prisoner during the First World War, describes
the prison system as the “epitome”—in the sense of microcosm—of US “economic and
social development” (15). In her 1923 memoir, In Prison, she describes the cruelty of the
guards, the deplorable sanitary conditions, the deprived lives of her fellow prisoners, and
the ruthless system of forced labor. While convict leasing had officially been abolished,
she explains, the clandestine continuation of this hyper-exploitative practice dominated
prison life. “At the very heart of the whole problem of prison brutality,” O’Hare writes,
“is the ever-present and age-old problem of the exploitation of human labor and of the
profits accruing from it” (108). With strict production quotas, enforced by beatings and
isolation, O’Hare and her fellow prisoners are thoroughly enmeshed in the US’s
burgeoning wartime economy, not exiled from it.

Prison autobiographers like London, Berkman, and O’Hare all depict carceral life
as flowing from, reinforcing, and recreating the social and economic conditions of the so-
called free world. Notably, none of these three makes the abolition of prisons a central
concern. By contrast, Lowrie and Hawthorne envision the outright end of incarceration,
arguing that only humanitarian sentiment has the power to transcend the prison wall and
ultimately tear it down. But the fact that London, Berkman, and O’Hare do not focus on
abolishing the institution of the prison need not obscure the abolitionist implications of
their texts. Rather than imagining a love that crosses over the wall to unite two otherwise
irreconcilable worlds, they set about digging tunnels under the wall. Excavating the
economic and ideological foundations of incarceration, they unsettle the carceral grammar to which many other critics of the prison adhere.

By dramatizing a stark distinction between free and unfree, the prison performs important rhetorical work for the state. Its walls purport to mark the limits of the state’s violence. For this reason Dylan Rodriguez characterizes the prison as a “mythology of sober and narrowly deployed state power” (47). Thus, even though Hawthorne calls for incarceration’s abolition, his exclusive focus on the institution’s brutality risks implying that such brutality is neatly contained in prisons. The state’s claim that its carceral violence is legitimate rests upon the premise that this violence is precisely targeted and will not spill over into the free world. By troubling the absolute division that prison walls attempt to demarcate, London, Berkman, and O’Hare put forward a quieter, but perhaps a more thoroughgoing abolitionism—rather than fixating on destroying the prison as an institution, they reveal the entanglement of the prison and the larger social system. Thus, they indict the alleged freedom of the “free world” just as forcefully as they decry the penitentiary’s false promises of rehabilitation.

A final caveat: I don’t mean to suggest that an anti-capitalist analysis guarantees a fully incisive prison abolitionism. On the contrary, the framework through which these white radicals understand the prison may conceal as much as it reveals. These authors grasp the social struggles that permeate the prison in terms of labor exploitation and class conflict. Writing in the heart of the Jim Crow era, their silence on the interconnections of racial domination and carceral violence is overwhelming. When Native and African American fellow prisoners do appear in these texts, it is frequently as pathetic invalids, as happy-go-lucky and complacent captives, or as depraved and tyrannical trustees.
Although these writers generally show how incarcerated subjects aren’t just creatures of the prison, but figures in a worldwide struggle, this re-contextualization is available primarily to whites. While white prisoners are recognized as maintaining their ties to the outside world as exploited laborers, the walls seem to be a bit more solid where black and Native prisoners are concerned. Ironically, these radicals fail to apply their insights about the ambivalent meaning of prison walls to populations for whom life in the “free” world is already an experience of captivity. The redundant nature of incarceration for oppressed communities of color was not lost, however, on the anonymous author of the “Autobiography of An Imprisoned Peon,” who was born in slavery and forced into debt peonage after Emancipation. Having always lived along the wavering boundary between freedom and its others, this author describes his terror upon first seeing a chain gang in these words: “I felt like running away, but I didn’t know where to go.”

Works Cited:


———. The Road. Macmillan, 1907.

