

Anywhere and Everywhere, Translating Captivity

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translation.

I am trying to be mindful in writing this, myself in one place, and you, the reader, in another. You might suggest that this is always the task of writing, speaking from one place to another, across some distance. But this essay began from a more precise desire, a desire to address translation — not only the translation of language, but the translation of life: its forms, practices, restrictions and freedoms.

For some time I have been thinking about the idea of “jurisdiction,” or how the authority of a state power is meant to end at its borders. I have been thinking about how this notion might limit our understanding of power, how it spreads and takes shape, and the relationships it forms between what appear to be discrete places. For example, from the U.S., to Estonia, to Norway, to South Africa — while each has its own jurisdictions and histories, what is shared across them?

language.

In terms of language, the translation of an idea is never an open window, as if an idea could pass untouched from one side to the other, unscathed as it leaves one house of sound and gesture to the next. Such passage always alters its content, refracting it; gathering it from the fabric of one set of histories, stories, patterns and habits and releasing it into another. The conditions for speech and for listening touch the translator and translated alike; they leave a stain upon the object that we had expected to pass unblemished. As an idea in the world aligns itself to a sound or an image, we see pollutants of life — locality, subjectivity and memory — attaching and smuggling themselves into each and every utterance.

Despite this, something of the original still translates — something that, regardless of the borders between, communicates through the noise. One thinker referred to “translatability,” saying that, “If the kinship of languages is to be demonstrated it means (...) that a specific significance inherent in the original manifest itself in its translatability.”¹

Rather than consider that significance as a mysterious power that, alone, refuses to dilute in its translation, we might ask if this is not a *significance to*, to the space in which that translation is received; where between the two objects there is a resonance, in the way that vibrations resonate sympathetically between objects and instruments sensitive to the same frequencies of sound. A resonance that has as much to do with a *receptivity* in the place of its arrival as it does with the force of the original.

place.

“Place,” too, is like a language. As a sense of place spreads, as it extends out through space, it lends a character to the things that fall within its sphere, offering feelings of location and identity, connections shared with people, things and histories, and a common sense of how

things work — knowhow, itineraries and secrets that structure the topography of place, the freedoms it will honor and the bondages it will coerce.

Such aspects of place are like words — they extend legibility to things. Like words, place offers shared meanings to things, translating private resonances from me to you so that we can share an understanding that bears local residues, developing relationships-in-common where we might decide how we feel about it, how we will live with it, and how we might differ in relationship to it. Moving with an aesthetic pulse of presence and absence, visible and invisible, voice and voiceless, place spreads like a language across a space, generating a field of commonality among those who weave through it, who come into dialogue, into agreement, into competition, and into relations of power.

At the edges of place, a border is formed — a location where, also like language, the legibilities lent by one place stop, giving way to another field of meanings. From one side of that border and back, an architecture of differences is accrued — differences concocted, marked and projected from each side onto its other so as to confirm the value of their respective sides. No matter how continuous and fluid things may remain from one side of that border to the other, place carries the illusionary power to erase their similarity, and the border becomes real, invested with violence. And just as this violence interrupts the flows of life at the border, the presumption of difference where continuity may in fact exist also allows things to pass unnoticed, where “kinships” of translatable things may be found to help us to better know our world and the powers that act in our name.

this place.

I am writing from the place where I live, Los Angeles. I live in a country that is obsessed with its borders, such that our airwaves dance with hallucinations of what does and does not cross them day and night. Rather than asking what conditions of translatability connect the sides of the border, what kinships in the language of place, necessity, family, land and history evoke passage across it, or what forms of receptivity we possess to encourage the border's transgression — politicians and private contractors make a healthy living constructing fences, giving speeches, building weapons, elaborating protocols for deadly force and the capture of people, as people become contraband.

This contributes to one of the fastest growing components of the prison and jail system that makes the U.S. the most prolific jailer in modern history. Within its jurisdiction, the U.S. possesses a rich economy in bodies, an economy of people moved in and out of their places, stripped of the rights that make them legible as human beings and political subjects; an economy that underlies the larger strata of wealth that structure the country's social body.

Outside its jurisdiction, the U.S. busies itself with expanding beyond its own borders. As one of the nations that aspires not only to be a nation, but an empire, it works to extend its influence over matters in every corner of the globe, including places where it was never invited nor announced. The scale and power of force that the U.S. commands offer many ways around international law and the objections of others — whether through secrecy, statecraft, the violence of “intervention,” the nuance of financial leverage, or the exporting of things that carry influence. Regardless of whether the U.S. has any official presence in a given place, it is busy exporting — just as it exports products for markets, it exports models of governance and political rule, attempting to migrate its practices and techniques of power to other places. One does not have to profit in an obvious way; to exercise control and to influence is to shape the geo-political future; a philosophy of translation in which force can compel receptivity where there may otherwise be none.

and everywhere.

Bumper stickers, essays, books and posters like to quote Martin Luther King Jr., including the letter he wrote to segregationist clergy members during one of his moments in jail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” the letter reads, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”² Beyond responding to these clergy members’ accusation of King and others as “outsiders coming in,” King’s statement offers a different philosophy of translation, one that traces the effects of things: “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly,” understanding quite well the futures to which we all are tied.

I do not hear in King’s argument that we should merely concern ourselves with matters that we are not connected to. Instead, I hear that we are already connected, our destinies entwined, where matters of injustice pay no mind to jurisdiction, nation, place nor border, but grow and spread, translating themselves into the logic of one culture after another, becoming normalized, becoming someone’s “option” in solving some problem, becoming unjust.

I hear in his argument that there is no difference between standing to protect someone else from the abuse of authority, and you protecting yourself — in both cases you are fighting the abuse of authority, and the abuse of authority must always be fought.

authority’s secrets.

Although they emerged around the same time in history, modern imprisonment was not born to facilitate the justice of equality sought by many in modern forms of democracy. Rather, in the language and values of the time, modern prisons were a translation of earlier, more overtly brutal forms of social control into new values of governance. While we are taught that imprisonment follows logically from the civil, legal practices of a democratic society (as a measured punishment, effective deterrent, or rational enforcement of law), those of us whose lives and communities are organized by prison practices are taught very differently by those practices, their institutions, their managers, and their effects on our lives, as they condition an acceptance of exclusion from democracy’s promises.

While historians tell us that the modern prison drew its techniques from monastic principles of isolation — the reflection and time believed necessary for spiritual growth — Michel Foucault qualifies this for us, saying that the result was never an end to the physical violence that had become, by his account, increasingly incompatible with modern discourses on human and civil rights. Instead, it was a movement of that violence out of sight, hidden behind prison walls. While on the level of appearances, it was an advancement toward a civilized, human dignity, as is claimed for prisons to this day, the penitentiary allowed the state to maintain the same violence and achieve the same resulting social control. Indeed, the prison today continues to spark less public outcry, less objection and revolt than would the enactment of state violence in public; for behind its walls remain secrets, stowed away from public knowledge.

growth.

The prison cell as an architecture had already existed — in relatively small jails, dungeons, and other structures for holding people captive; and the modern penitentiary was born by multiplying them from tens and twenties to hundreds and thousands, forming small cities that required the planning, infrastructure, and the inventive institutional design that modern

architecture was making possible elsewhere in hospitals, factories, schools, and armies. As these “social scales” of the industrial revolution touched all such institutions, the number of prisoners to come would be unprecedented. Comparable numbers of the captive and caged had existed only in mass encampments of captured soldiers during war, of refugees following mass expulsions, or in the captive spatializations of slave societies. Since this time, the penitentiary model has only continued to grow and become more normalized, more relied upon as a technology of unequal democracies, as a default solution to poverty, joblessness, and deprivations of education, enfranchisement, medical care and freedom; to the point where, today, the world prison population is a record 10.1 million, with the U.S. setting historical records in both total number and percentage of prisoners per its inhabitants — its prison system has grown 820% since 1970, from 280,000 prisoners to close to 2.3 million.³

crisis.

In an interview about this growth with historian, educator and activist, Ruth Wilson Gilmore in 2000, she said:

Whenever there has been prison expansion in Western Society, it’s come after a major crisis, where a lot of people have been pushed out of old relations of domination and subordination.⁴

Gilmore gives the example of the British enclosure movements, where the liberation of people from Feudal bondage coincided with modernizing property law, simultaneously pushing them out of their historical lands and into swelling cities, leaving them to find new social relations and economies within which to make a life. Gilmore also offers the example of the emancipation of enslaved populations in the U.S. following its civil war, where similarly, alongside a liberation came a displacement — millions of people having to find new places and ways to live. In both of these instances, peoples whose place in society had been controlled in one way were released from its legal and formal structures, while just as much as they were liberated, they faced the crisis of opportunity for what would come next.

In both cases, the larger societies themselves faced a crisis. The hierarchical orders they had been based upon were now destabilized, as each was stripped of the practices that had kept its most disempowered and subordinated people “in their place” within that order and its economy. As the old practices were translated into new, what followed this larger societal crisis was the birth of both countries’ first mass prison populations — a key institution in allowing their social order and their evolving productive forces to be maintained. In post-Magna Carta civil society, this meant the articulation of new legal codes: Victorian and Elizabethan “Poor Laws” in Britain, and “Black Codes” and “Jim Crow Laws” in the U.S.

Gilmore concludes with a third crisis, which in the U.S. begins after World War II and comes to a head in the 1950s and 60s, when communities organized themselves to end Black Codes, Jim Crow, and other forces of segregation and disenfranchisement. As this contributed to a similar crisis in the social order, overt apartheid laws were replaced by criminal codes that appeared emptied of their racial contents.

Rooted in the rhetoric of *crime* instead of race, this language would soon be accompanied by words of “war” as well: the “War on Drugs,” which accounts for nearly half of today’s radical prison growth, alongside the more general “war on crime”; the “War on Poverty” that had turned into a “war on the poor”; the “war on the border” that brought these forces to the border itself; the “war on gangs,” which accompanies the gentrification movements that

have inverted the flows of “white flight” and capital flight; and the “War on Terror,” which has made racial profiling even easier, and has revealed the numerous links between domestic law enforcement, military and “intelligence” capacities abroad. Today, we see these same racial hierarchies, cultural and religious prejudices mirrored in the prison: half the population is African American, with Black men imprisoned at almost seven times that of White men; Latino men are jailed at almost three times; and American Indian people are among the most highly imprisoned groups in North America. All of this is echoed in an increased use of imprisonment in the spaces of U.S. wars — Iraq, Afghanistan, and particularly Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

this is a crime.

Accordingly, in relation to what we call “crime,” Gilmore’s three examples show how generally, the abstract concepts of law are directed selectively in their application, permitting attacks and controls on specific communities of people without having to appear so on their surface. Just like the prison wall conceals state violence, so can the naming of crime conceal the politics of a law and its prosecution.

In an interview conducted with Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie in 2005, he answered the following when asked, “What is crime?”:

It is so important to understand it is not a clear entity. It is a result of a lot of interaction, a lot of talks, a lot of perceptions, before you come to the conclusion that this was a crime. You can use simple experience from daily life: when your family members should do something you dislike, your kids take some money — most kids do that now and then — from the parents’ pockets. You could think, well, this was not a right thing. Maybe she needs more pocket money, you could say that this was a protest action; that she wants attention. Or(...)if you came from the outside and it wasn’t your child...you could think, “This was a theft.”

What was the meaning of that particular act? That varies immensely. And this is from the small things to the large things. We know of course that killing, that might be seen as murder, it might be seen as patriotic acts. (...) And it’s so important to keep that sort of freedom in the picture, because then you can understand that you can meet these acts in other ways than the standardized ways of punish and imprisonment.⁵

By the end of his response, Christie complicates our notion of crime, pointing out the relative degrees of familiarity or estrangement that tend to move someone from “misbehaving” (like a child, neighbor or friend) to “criminal” (the stranger, the Other, the dangerous). Moreover, Christie is also critiquing the conditioned presumption that prison is the logical and only response to the acts we do not like.

Consider that the majority of acts that receive prison as their punishment are committed not out of choice but a lack of choice, a lack of reasonable opportunities for survival that lead to chronic desperation, pain, disorientation and resentment; conditions concentrated in communities that have been systematically undermined for decades and centuries.

Today, our social systems are so broken and undermined — alienating in their massive scales, unloving and unproductive in their disciplinary responses — that by the time most reprehensible acts have been committed, we have no idea what layers of missed opportunities might have changed the course that led to them, let alone read into them the histories of injustice at play.

Instead, the rhetoric of crime buries such complex chains of cause and effect deep

within the abstract figure of the criminal, suturing, as racism does, the ugliness of an act to the mythical “nature” of a person or group. And as racial, economic, ethnic, or immigrant-based prejudices are given their discursive expression in law, they are given spatial expression in the prison.

good will.

It is not the job of bureaucrats to grapple with the contradictions of history, the biases of economic structure or the antagonisms of social inequality. While the state claims to make the administration of justice objective, it can just as easily appropriate what would otherwise be theorized and developed throughout houses and streets with a more intimate accountability, and with a stake in the health of its outcomes. Taking the theorization of justice out of the hands of local community members stultifies our ability to respond to difficult situations and contradictions, leaving us instead with oversimplified narratives that play toward vengeance and vilification, feeding our prejudices and our investments in the inequalities that enrich us.

While one can comprehend possible “just” uses and outcomes of imprisonment, where a jail cell lets a drunk sober up or a violent rage to cool off, or where one bent more generally on destruction in life can transform that life into a citizenship more compatible with those of their neighbors, locating such cases without more far reaching and broad, devastating consequences is difficult. Each would be easier to find in television shows and the general myths of the criminal justice system than in actual practice, for beyond their objective capacity for mass containment, they hold within them the internment, disappearance, and captivity for which they were invented.

Ultimately, the question becomes less about good or bad intentions in a jail’s administration, and more about the capacities that we are building. Once you have the capacity for large-scale domination — be it an army, a police force or a prison — it doesn’t take someone interested in domination to put it to that use. More common will be the well intentioned, or merely competent administrators, who only have to do their job to realize the capacities already built implicitly into its form.

free markets.

One of the ways that older hierarchies remap themselves onto today’s larger world is in the uneven relationships between wealthier and poorer nations, where crises old and new are aggravated and enflamed. As the more powerful nations compete for influence beyond their borders — for access to raw materials, markets for export, for cheap labor, airspace and geography — we see lending schemes, trade agreements and the threat of force coercing the restructuring of the local economies and social and governance policies of others. Throughout the so-called developing world, we see the same dismantling of social programs, education and welfare-state institutions that have accompanied the prison boom in the U.S., while nations drop their environmental regulations, labor laws, trade barriers and other protections for local people, land and sovereignty.

As new markets form across these borders, facilitating the movement of goods, services and discourses, hierarchies of mobility and free movement flourish. Corporate and non-governmental entities migrate throughout the globalized world in ways that vast majorities of people, including their unions and social organizations, are unable. As a result, we see the same crises and social instability that Gilmore warns about, as people are pushed out of their social relations and old ways of life, remaining stuck without the safety nets that might otherwise have

caught them.

This creates perfect conditions of translatability — receptivity for the logics of mass imprisonment, where the agents of prison growth look for expanding markets, peddling criminalization and incarceration as cutting edge methods to deal with mounting instability. This has only been exacerbated since the early 2000s, as the “War on Terror” has offered an additional set of political language and legal techniques to crack down on ethnic, religious and economic minorities. Thus, the export of the “crime control,” “moral outrage” and “anti-terror” movements pays big money for lectures by former police chiefs, military and public officials who help to translate their terms to local conditions, as well as to private consulting firms, to corporations that seek new markets for their weapons, border technologies and high security building materials, and to those cycling military technologies into carceral industries and the leasing of security personnel.

anywhere everywhere.

Since the end of the Cold War, the massive prison growth of the U.S. has been followed most closely by that of Eastern Europe. Russia has the closest incarceration rate to that of the U.S, followed by the Baltic States and South Africa, each of which are in the midst of decades-long crises in their historical social order. Across their differences of border and place, as well as any location that a reader of this text sits, can be found these continuities — uninterrupted practices and capacities for social control that link jurisdictions and lineages of domination. And for those interested in research, they can easily be traced according to the lobbyists, consultants, contractors, and “development” loans that travel there and circulate through their capitals.

In the same interview with Nils Christie, he concluded:

And you can ask, yeah, what’s wrong? That is the question of our values. Do we accept that our society represents us with that large amount of prisoners? We could in theory say there were many nice ideals included in the fascist and Nazi and state socialist ideas, but I would of course, first and foremost, evaluate those systems by their prison populations: the concentration camps, the gulags. And it is a tendency to talk so much about the horror of the gulags that we forget to look at our own systems — what are we creating now with this enormous increase in prison population in many countries. Is it acceptable then, if you like our economic-political system, can it still be acceptable that you still have a cost of incarceration like this? This is the other side of the coin...⁶

from here to the reader.

From my place of writing to your place of reading: our differences may be ones of geography and location, nation and state, the scale and density of our neighborhoods, city or countryside, and the sameness or diversity of the cultures that fills them; there may be differences of resources and capital, language, the cosmic forces we believe organize our world, and the different proximities to war that we possess, just as we each hold different histories that have arrived us *here*.

During research for a recent project in Turkey, it was suggested I look into the growing numbers of women entering Turkey’s prison system. This, it was explained to me, was the result of gender politics and Islam, women fighting back against what has been characterized in Western media as “honor killings” — a religious difference posed a fundamental distinction

from how women now constitute one of the fastest growing prison populations in the U.S. But after initial research, interviews with women and advocates, and conversations with a group of women in a local prison, it became clear that the common denominator in many of these cases was not religion. It appeared instead to be exactly what drove many women into prison in the U.S. – defending themselves against violence from spouses and family members in the context of poverty.

Across our differences of place, beneath the distinctions that – like language – each place colors its circumstances, there is our common relationship to what happens to us—our “single garment of destiny” is woven by real, material connections that the play of differences and the limits of jurisdiction always seem to erase.

If we consider the rise in imprisonment practices throughout the world not as many individual fires, but as one great fire that branches out, stoking global conditions of crisis, networks of captivity that facilitate the subordination required for the progress of global capitalism, then what politics of translation begin to become possible? What politics of translation become necessary?

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” in: *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” <http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html> Accessed 14 May 2014.

³ Roy Walmsley, “World Prison Population List: 10th edition,” International Centre for Prison Studies, University of Essex, October 2013
<http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/prisonstudies.org/files/resources/downloads/w ppl_10.pdf>.

⁴ See “Corrections,” a feature documentary produced by Ashley Hunt, 2001.

⁵ See *A World Map: In which We See...*, a mapping and video project by Ashley Hunt (www.aworldmap.com). Also read any of the many important works by Nils Christie, including *Crime Control as Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and *A Suitable Amount of Crime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Ibid.

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