

# Degrees of Permeability

## Confinement, Power and Resistance in Freetown's Central Prison

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### Abstract

This article deconstructs a binary that has arisen between prisons as, on the one hand, 'total institutions' of exclusion and, on the other, 'carceral continuums' that incorporate marginalized urban livelihoods. The experiences of four inmates at Pademba Road, Freetown's male prison – which accommodates inmates with sentences from one year to life – illustrate that prisons belong in neither camp. Instead, inmates' unique responses to their imprisonment show that both a prison's continuity and its exclusionary mechanism are situational and gendered as crime, social standing, capital and agency coalesce. Following Michel de Certeau's examination of people's reappropriations of culture in everyday life, this article analyses how inmates' tactics to reinforce and bend prison walls work to either strengthen or undermine the carceral system's strategies and influence the prison's permeability. Inmates' embodied experiences allow for a nuanced understanding of the inside/outside relationship of imprisonment and of the space between mobility and stasis, subjugation, embrace and resistance.

**Keywords:** carceral continuum, confinement, factories of exclusion, Sierra Leone, strategies, tactics, total institutions, West Africa

### Sites of confinement – sites of academic interest

Questions regarding the logics of punishment and confinement have long inspired academic work because they serve as microcosms for a society's composition and disposition. Friedrich Nietzsche showed how debt and restitution became the framework for conceptualizing criminality, wherein 'justice' constitutes the search for equality between a crime – which causes a debt – and its punishment, which serves as restitution (for a thorough review see Butler 2014). Using the categorical imperative, Immanuel Kant argued that the only just punishment for a crime is its



equal, so that debt and payment could cancel each other out. However, this assumes a neutral processing of cases and an equal treatment before the law that is untainted by background, by the relationship between those involved and by society at large: clearly, a neutrality which is impossible.

Indeed, instead of punishment equal to the wrongdoing, the latter is predominantly translated into a different mode of punishment: a prison sentence. Prisons and their structures of confinement are illustrations of the mechanisms a society uses in its attempts to transform inmates into specific, 'common' citizens (Foucault 1977: 135). A society's values, fears and aspirations impact upon crime and punishment. Prisons thus serve as prisms through which a society's symbolic (Butler 2004), social, political and economic (Wacquant 2001) makeup is exposed. In Sierra Leone – and elsewhere – these parameters structure the criminal justice system and the way prisons operate. Inductively, they come into play as the social standing and socioeconomic background of the accused – in other words the economic and social resources they can mobilize in their defence – influence investigation, trial, sentencing and experience of imprisonment. To put this another way, those from marginalized backgrounds tend to be punished harder; they mobilize less sympathy and support, both among the mainstream population and criminal justice personnel, as the symbolic idea of their 'bad reputation' adds weight to their sentence. Looking into these mechanisms and their consequences, Loïc Wacquant (2001) concludes that confining institutions and marginalized urban spaces coalesce in a 'deadly symbiosis' – a continuum of precarity that disproportionately disadvantages already marginalized people in and outside of prison. While this concept has gained currency in recent years, scholars have put forth two different perspectives on this issue.

The first group argues that while already marginalized groups are disproportionately jailed, the separation between prison and society is absolute. Prisons are thus 'total institutions' (Goffman [1961] 1999) of exclusion. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) demonstrates how prisons moved from 'factories of labour', which thought to punish and re-educate inmates by putting them to work, to 'factories of exclusion' in the form of post-correctional centres where certain members of society are locked away and immobilized without being given any tasks to 'protect' the rest of society from an unjustified fear of them. Judith Butler (2004) shows how, next to literal violence, there is a vast arena of symbolic violence wherein excessive punishment is dealt out to irrationally selected enemies. It is this 'fear of small numbers' (Appadurai 2006) that leads individuals to be permanently excluded from society.

Following Wacquant (2001), another group of scholars argues that today the movement of people, goods and services between prisons and marginalized urban spaces undermines the idea of prisons as 'worlds apart' (Da Cunha 2008). Instead, prison and marginalized urban areas become more and more alike as access to mainstream society recedes. This continuum of exclusion builds what Karen Waltorp and Steffen Jensen call the 'prison–township circuit ... a world of confinement apart from mainstream society' (2018: 1).

While the first group focuses on the exclusion of the individual and his/her confinement within prisons that are not permeable, the second treats confinement as disproportionately affecting certain social groups that stay connected in and outside of prison but are excluded from wider society.

Based on the experiences of four inmates at Pademba Road prison who developed unique responses to their situation, this article examines notions of continuity and homogeneity in prisoners' experiences of the inside/outside relationship between prison and society in Sierra Leone. The article builds on more than six years of research with respondents in Freetown that culminated in thirteen months of fieldwork on violence, dispute mediation and law in households, communities, courts and Pademba Road prison (2016–2017). There, I conducted narrative and life history interviews with seventy-nine inmates. Additionally, I conducted ethnographic observations of everyday practices in the prison and interviewed former inmates in Freetown. The following ethnographic accounts present the experiences of the Professor (sixties) convicted of murder, Sunny (fifteen) convicted of stealing a radio, Joker (seventeen) convicted of fraudulent conversion and obtaining money by false pretence, and PO (twenty-nine) convicted of conspiracy and impersonation. All respondents are from marginalized neighbourhoods and squatter settlements in Freetown and, apart from PO, our conversations took place entirely inside the prison.<sup>1</sup>

These accounts reveal that it is the tension between these two models that captures inmates' experiences at Pademba Road prison. For some, prison follows a 'paradigm of exclusion' (Bauman 2000), which severs all contact with the outside world; for others, prison forms a continuum in a marginalized existence, albeit a gendered one. Where – and indeed whether – a dividing line is drawn is based on the nature of the crime and its author's social standing, interpersonal relationships and available socioeconomic capital.

### **Pademba Road – self-governance and the power of association**

Pademba Road, Freetown's male correctional centre, was founded by British officials in 1914 (Sesay 2014). While the prison has a capacity of 324 prisoners, the current prison population exceeds two thousand inmates (17 May 2018). The men and boys are held in six cellblocks: Blyden, Wilberforce, Clarkson, Howard House, Remand and the Condemned Block, which hosts inmates sentenced to life without possibility of parole (Schneider 2018: 259). The cellblocks are hierarchically organized and show significant differences regarding overcrowding, size and equipment. Most cells are fitted with a few mats to sleep on and a bucket that serves as a toilet.

Pademba Road's management style combines a shared-powers model and an inmate control model, both developed by Israel Barak-Glantz (1981). The former grants inmates certain rights for group association and a say in administrative decisions. In the latter, which gained prominence in Latin America, inmates – often organized into gangs – take control from the administration. In Pademba Road, there are insufficient resources allocated to the prison to hire enough staff

to effectively police the prison population. Consequently, guards rarely enter the cellblocks, which are sealed by heavy metal gates, and selected prisoners, who are left entirely in charge of their fellow inmates, largely govern the prison. These men are called 'red bands' and they control the interior of the cellblocks with no oversight and unlimited power. Red bands command others – the so-called muscles – to carry out their instructions. Scarrer, an ex-combatant and red band, said:

Red bands are untouchable. They rule. Because the officers are not many and very, very afraid of us, the gangsters and murderers and hardened criminals, no police will ever enter the cellblocks. The red bands have everything: money, cigarettes,<sup>2</sup> ties [marijuana]. Some can even leave the prison to go party or 'finish the job'<sup>3</sup> if they just pay off a prison guard.<sup>4</sup>

And Ripper, a young man with multiple prison experiences, told me:

The power is with the red band, you know. He can simply say 'this guy needs to be raped, this guy needs to be beaten, this guy will sit in the shit-bucket today', and people are unable to refuse. He takes bribes for protection. If you don't pay, you... Each block has a red band. There are some blocks that get along and some that fight, and people can also be exchanged between blocks.

Red bands are chosen based on their social capital, which translates to their power to mobilize, to control and to invoke fear. Thus, notorious gang leaders and inmates with life sentences are the most likely candidates. HungryBaller, another long-term inmate, told me:

The guards and even the government fear them because they know that at any time they could be broken out. It is they who rule the prison, really, and they only stay inside because they want to.

In theory, Pademba Road is an example of a penitentiary that combines a prison with workshops and a medical facility, replacing the prisoner with the delinquent (Foucault 1977). Due to this shared model, the majority of inmates have yard time only once a week for a few hours and remain predominantly confined to their cells. A small number of inmates control the kitchen, the distribution of food, the workshops and all other social activities.

Within the prison, security is constructed along lines of social power and membership. Inmates who self-identify as ex-combatants form a large social group that splits into factions along the dividing lines of the civil war (1991–2002). Freetown's various gangs are represented in Pademba Road as their members circle in and out of prison. Inmates without association may compete for membership through demonstrating complete obedience to a gang leader and willingness to put the needs of the group over personal wellbeing. Men and boys who receive sentences exceeding seven years are sent to Pademba Road from all over the country, leading to other social formations around geographical location and ethnicity. Age is a fourth group indicator. Additionally, there is a large group of inmates on

remand who were arrested for minor offences but have thus far been unable to pay their bail in full or produce a surety. Others have been waiting for years for their cases to be heard in the courts. Inmates with no ties to any of these groups are often isolated and struggle to find their feet within the prison hierarchy.

### *The Professor – permeating the walls through rumour*

The Professor, a man in his sixties with a frail body but a sharp mind, is the most influential red band in Pademba Road. The Professor's life prior to prison is unknown. He never talks about it. Nobody quite knows when he was imprisoned. When I asked, inmates and guards alike assumed that 'he has always been there, definitely from before the war'.

The Professor, who is serving a sentence for murder, states confidently: 'I am choosing to be inside. In here, I am the head'. He describes imprisonment as a choice, not an inescapable fact. The prison walls seem not to matter to him because he does not perceive them as restrictive. The Professor runs one of the workshops where tools are readily available. Whenever goods enter the prison, they are brought to him by his muscles. The Professor's cell is semi-furnished and shared with only two others. In his workshop, he has created a 'chill-out space' where he sits and reads while his muscles do all the handiwork. His informal business is flourishing and the list of those trying to get close to him is long.

The Professor's influence is linked to, among other things, a famous prison break in 2010 when between nineteen and thirty inmates, convicted for murder and armed robbery, escaped through the main gate after firing a pistol that resulted in the guards abandoning their posts (BBC News 2010). This escape, together with rumours of how red bands could leave the prison for a bribe, threw the 'fact' that the prison is inescapable into question.

The Professor's authority, as he told me, does not stem from his physical strength, but from his ability to manipulate information. Although existing reports never mention him and official narratives deny his involvement, the Professor is rumoured to have enabled this prison break by training those in his cellblock and workshop to 'overthrow power'. In no way does he contribute towards dispersing these rumours. Instead he recognizes, as he told me with a flashing-serious look, that 'words are most powerful. These people here live from stories. Now if you know how to place words ... you can control the world'.

This relates to Steven Hahn's finding that rumours can serve as a form of collective and dynamic political struggle (1997: 124). And in fact, the Professor assumed that 'the prison break will never be forgotten because it makes us on the inside believe that things can be different and that there is a choice to us being here'. It was Vicente Rafael (2000) who stated that:

By divorcing understanding from ownership, rumors are ineluctably public, condemned to promiscuous circulation ... and a kind of illegitimate historicity. Rumors constitute the 'noise' between those events destined for memorialization. (2000: 117)

The way the Professor used the 'noise' over his involvement in the prison break, how he wrote history, took ownership over events and influenced the collective imagination can be understood as a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985). Due to their anonymous, constantly altering, readily amenable characteristics, and their openness to transmission and embellishment, rumours are one way through which subordinate individuals and groups can establish a position of authority. Through creating, manipulating and dominating the discourse, the Professor secured his position within the prison landscape and, subsequently, influenced how those under his command interpreted information and action, and transmitted interpretations to the realm of public discourse.

Thus, it is through rumour that the Professor creates the permeability of the prison walls and ensures his superior position within the prison. Rather than submitting to the arbitrariness of prison life, the Professor builds a structure that allows him to regain not only agency, but power. By placing himself at the very top of the prison hierarchy, the Professor turns domination into sub-dominance (Freire [1970] 2005). Although his life is entirely inside the prison and all history of a previous life has been consciously erased, the Professor moves freely through the prison. Through his informal business, he constantly transcends internal walls literally and prison walls symbolically. He thus embodies elements of both the discourse of exclusion and that of a continuum.

Sunny, who is placed firmly at the lowest end of the prison hierarchy, uses the opposite tactic of being for himself rather than ruling through social webs.

### *Sunny – confined to the inside*

Sunny is fifteen years old. His parents died during the war and he was raised by his aunt, who is a caterer. From a very young age, Sunny had to wake up around 4 a.m., when the pump opened, to get water. Later, he would wash the pots and pans and help with the cooking before sweeping the room and doing the laundry. During the day, he assisted in his uncle's electronics shop. Sunny was never allowed to go to school. One day he stole a radio from the shop, took it to the nearby school and tried to exchange it for school fees. The headmaster called his uncle, who did not take him home but reported him to the police. When I spoke to his uncle, he told me: 'Sunny has rotten blood. His parents were idle. This boy is not good. I never wanted to take him, and that radio was his real person coming out'. Sunny never denied the theft and is serving a two-year sentence.

After the arrest, Sunny started experiencing necropolitics – 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2003: 39), leading to disassociation of punishment from wrongdoing and to the attempted annihilation of agency at the hands of state power. Minors are supposed to be sent to Dems, the Juvenile Detention Centre, but because the security at Dems is low, two mechanisms of subjugation result. Youths are either sent to Pademba Road without a record of their real age, or they are recorded to be eighteen and tried as adults. Criminal justice personnel thus perform already marginalized minors out of existence.

For Sunny the prison walls are as rigid as can be. Being cramped in the most crowded cell, with neither social nor economic capital – no contacts within the prison and no things to trade from the ‘outside’ – he finds himself at the lowest end of all the prison hierarchies. While the Professor could render the prison walls almost transparent through his business and his rumours, the distinction between outside and inside is impenetrable for Sunny. Instead, the logics of arrest, trial and incarceration resulted in a complete severance of social ties. By severing all his ties to the outside world, the ‘prison complex’ executed symbolic violence: it ‘annihilated’ Sunny ‘as a social being’ (Le Marcis 2017). While goods, services and communications flow in and out as certain prisoners are integrated into a network of mutually influencing institutions to varying degrees, prisoners like Sunny continue to be excluded from these transactions, a segregation even more sharply evident through its nuances. The prison therefore remains a ‘total social institution’ in Erving Goffman’s sense for many ([1961] 1999), while those in control can pass through its walls.

Sunny did not have legal representation or any person to advocate for him. Neither did he have any way to prove his real age. Furthermore, his accusers were his own family, which made him extremely suspicious in the eyes of other inmates. ChainSaw, who shared a cell with him, told me: ‘That man, I dunno – when your own family accuses you something must be wrong with you – maybe he is a witch, or maybe – I don’t know, but that man is not sober’. And a guard told me: ‘It is like in the song [*Nor Pwell Me*] “If your house does not sell you, the street won’t buy you”’.<sup>5</sup> Unable to find acceptance in a workshop or negotiate time away from his cell, Sunny is locked in for six days in a row, receiving no visitors and no information from ‘outside’.

Sunny’s form of everyday resistance lies in non-participation and apathy (Scott 1985). In the darkness of his cell, he sits in the same spot, staring straight ahead for hours on end. He does not participate in any activities and rarely speaks. Sometimes I left Sunny after several hours during which neither of us spoke a word. What I know of him, I know from his case file, his fellow inmates and the few times when he whispered into the silence, mostly without looking at me. These whispers, which would linger in the foul air, sounded like this: ‘I am done’, he sometimes said. Or ‘everything is done’.

He is one of four other inmates with whom I conducted research who are entirely excluded from human connection. These cases are strong examples of the consequence of necropolitics: of ‘the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead’ (Mbembe 2003: 39–40). Through necropolitical practices, the state’s criminal justice system constituted Sunny as a criminal subject who would serve a sentence proportional to the crime committed. To achieve this state, Sunny had to be convicted not as a minor, but as an adult,<sup>6</sup> a circumstance that stripped him not only of legal rights but also of his own identity. Another core component required a total separation between Sunny’s past life and his life in prison, a recreation of Sunny as the convicted felon. At

the heart of these practices was dehumanization, a separation that severed all ties between the different spheres that connected Sunny to the world and left him with only his own 'irreality' (Sartre [1940] 2004).

This relates to Bauman's (2000) notion of a post-correctional age in which the logics of punishment are no longer to transform, but to exclude, to lock away. The reasons for the disproportional punishment Sunny received – being locked away in an adult prison for stealing a radio to pay school fees – must be analysed not separate from, but in relation to larger structures of oppression. Sunny is not only at the lowest end of prison hierarchies but at the lowest end of society. Underappreciated by the family who raised him and without social support, he was never able to take direction over his own life. His agency was constantly reduced: first by his aunt, who had him do household chores rather than sending him to school; secondly by his uncle who accused him rather than protecting him; and thirdly by the criminal justice system, which tried him as an adult and sent him to a correctional facility for adults.

In prison his story caused suspicion, as it seemed too absurd, too threatening, to be true. His fellow inmates, who could not understand why his family had 'sold' him to the system, rejected him in order to reject the idea of a 'paradigm of exclusion' that extended far beyond the prison and hit those most vulnerable the hardest. Finding fault with Sunny rather than with the system kept their faith alive in a system that was at least semi-just. At the same time, this alienation of Sunny to protect the idea of a semi-just system completed the 'paradigm of exclusion' as Sunny was now cut off from social worlds not only outside but also inside the prison.

As such, Sunny represents an experience of imprisonment that follows the first paradigm of exclusion and impenetrable prison walls. The mechanisms of exclusion are based on Wacquant's notion of disproportional punishment of marginalized groups, but as this mechanism continues inside the prison, Sunny is no longer part of even the marginalized group that is punished and excluded from others. Instead, he is reduced to an individual whose ties to all others are severed. Since even those who are 'othered' by an unjust system reject him, he embodies Bauman's theory of exclusion.

Joker's story, on the other hand, is one that combines both paradigms: that of separation and that of continuity.

### *Joker – moving between two worlds*

When his aunt left for the UK, she allowed Joker, seventeen, and his wife and daughter to live in her apartment. Joker saw the perfect opportunity to raise some money. He rented the apartment out and continued living rent free with his friends who had a big house. However, eventually the aunt discovered his tactic and reported him to the police. He was subsequently convicted for fraudulent conversion and obtaining money by false pretences and is now serving five years.

In prison he immediately began networking through a combination of careful observations of the social relations within the prison and attempts to position



himself most favourably within them. Realizing that the library was a place where different organizations that collaborated with the prison conducted their activities, and that it was not under the control of a red band, he made the position of librarian his goal. By means of tactically foregrounding his intellectual skills, his neutrality within the prison's social structure, his reliability and his politeness to prison guards, he eventually succeeded.

As the librarian, he was able to leave his cellblock six days a week as compared to the four hours per week normal for many other prisoners. As the library was open to all inmates who were allowed to leave their cells and was relatively unpoliced – and because, as he put it, other inmates did not find him 'fearful' – he gained information about various cellblocks and the happenings in the prison. His shifts were so long that they covered the yard time of different cellblocks. As a result, many prisoners quickly learnt to rely upon him to deliver messages between various members of cellblocks.

His new position had positive ramifications for his status within his cell as well. Because he was well connected, Joker could carry the world outside the cellblock back into his cell and share it with his cell mates. In so doing, he shrank the importance of the prison as a separating institution of exclusion and expanded the life-worlds of his cell mates far beyond their cellblock. And because Joker treated information and stories as currency to be exchanged for goods and services, he had a steady stream of income. This income then allowed him to further increase his influence.

In that sense, his life in and outside of prison was one of continuities. Just as outside of prison he sought to make money, now he sought to create connections and position himself in a way that made him useful to others. The fact that Joker's aunt had reported him did not decrease his status as it had for Sunny. Indeed, she was considered to be in the wrong, whereas Sunny's story was never believed to be the full picture. That Joker had tried to make a profit increased his social standing and gave him the status of a businessman with his wits about him. Because he was caught, he did not attract envy but likeability.

However, Joker missed his wife Fatu and his daughter terribly. It is this separation that exposes the prison as a 'total institution'. Joker spoke about them whenever we met and many of his cell mates explained that his being 'crazy in love' made him 'mad' because he 'focuses too much on his family who is gone'. After he was imprisoned, Fatu moved back in with her parents, who lived about a six-hour drive from Freetown. Due to the long and expensive trip, Joker's contact with his wife and daughter went from seeing them every day to seeing them for a few minutes two to three times a year. Seeing and feeling his family slipping away rendered the prison's power omnipresent; it not only separated Joker from his family but was able to dissolve the family relationship, changing his previous position as father, husband and provider to that of the absent criminal.

While his family could occasionally gain a glimpse into his life-world, he was unable to take any part in theirs. Joker did not see his daughter growing up. Milestones such as her first steps, her first day in kindergarten and her first tooth

were reduced to stories told by his wife rather than shared experiences. This relates to Jean-Paul Sartre's ([1940] 2004) observation that relationships require 'perpetually renewed efforts of approximation' (Sartre [1940] 2004: 145; Schneider 2018) in a never-ending attempt to grasp one another completely. While the end goal of complete understanding is impossible to achieve, it is these constant attempts at approximation that nourish our love for who a person is and not for how we construct her to be. The more our memory takes over, the more 'genuine feelings' are replaced by 'imaginary feelings', just as our idea of someone becomes increasingly unrealistic with time because memories write stories of their own (Sartre [1940] 2004: 145; Schneider 2018: 278–279). Hence, as I wrote elsewhere, 'through imprisonment, personal relationships move from a real presence to an imagined one, they fade away, alive only in their imagined otherness' (Schneider 2018: 278).

Joker's situation shows that while his life is one of partial continuities in and outside of prison, exclusion plays an equally big part in his prison experience. Although the prison walls become more permeable as Joker receives and disseminates information between guards and prisoners and sees goods moving in and out of the prison, his self has been stripped of the subject positions he cherished the most: husband and father. His longing for his family makes the separating element of imprisonment a constant concern. Situations such as Joker's show that although the prison is permeable to some extent, this permeability is gendered. In Sierra Leone, persons of the opposite sex never circulate in and out of the same prison in any other capacity than as visitors. The life-worlds of families and heterosexual couples are irrevocably changed as neither the life inside nor the life outside can be shared through anything other than stories, memory and imagination. Consequently, both elements exist side by side: the prison as a continuum and the prison as a total institution of absolute exclusion.

As a single individual with five brothers and no sisters, PO's experience is vastly different. Since his sentences are always short and his social connections span both worlds, he embodies Wacquant's concept of a 'deadly symbiosis' between prison and marginalized urban spaces.

#### *PO (Police Officer) – mocking the system*

PO's story is best introduced through an excerpt from my fieldnotes from 27 January 2017, which depicts his trial:

Normally the corridors leading to Court Room 1 are empty. Not today. People form tight rows down the corridor. The courtroom is equally packed. Once I make my way through the crowds and squeeze myself onto the journalist's bench, I try to count the number of attendees, accused, police officers and lawyers without success; the scene resembles a hidden-object challenge, albeit one with constantly moving elements.

Two murder cases are opened but neither journalists nor visitors pay particular attention to them. Instead, the focus is on an accused person who has a bench all to himself, even though the bench next to him is crowded with a number of other

accused waiting their turn. In addition, there is something about him that keeps the police at an angry distance. Soon, I understand what.

The confident looking man seems calm when he takes the stand. He does not acknowledge the massive applause that accompanies his short walk from the bench to the stand, an imperviousness that makes the applause seem even louder. As the case file is handed to the magistrate, the magistrate's face changes quickly from neutral to highly amused. 'Let's have it then' he says, urging the investigating police officer to read the charges.

The man is accused of conspiracy and impersonation of a police officer. For over two years, he had stopped vehicles and collected fines in full police uniform. After the charges have been read, the magistrate turns to the accused and asks: 'Young man, did you do this?' 'Yes Sahr' replies the accused without hesitation. 'Why did you do it?' the magistrate asks. 'White teeth and black hearts are too many in this country', answers the accused, citing a popular proverb that means that someone's seemingly genuine smile and sincerity may mask serious wrongdoing. The accused continues by saying: 'I saw that the police were not working. They take money from us, the poor *okada* riders [bike riders], and let the big men who eat all the money go free. So, I stopped them and collected fines'. 'How did you do this?' the magistrate inquires. 'I will not tell Sahr', replies the accused.

I have never heard a magistrate question a witness directly rather than through the legal counsel, let alone engage in a form of conversation. Further, the way in which the accused responds negates the power asymmetry between him and the magistrate. So far, the proceedings are akin to a political theatre performance enacted to expose the failures of the police – a performance in which the magistrate partakes. Addressing the full courtroom, the magistrate calls the man 'the most efficient police officer in Freetown's history'. In fact, he gives him his nickname by calling him PO, Police Officer. He tries to determine how much money PO made, but PO refuses to give any indication. The magistrate urges other officers to take an example from PO as he 'probably collected more fines than any of you'. Then he addresses PO again and says: 'We need people like you in the force. You would make a fine officer. After your sentence you should really sign up for police training'.

There seems to be an amicable complicity between the magistrate and PO, which further ridicules the police officers present. Several times, the magistrate asks to see the photographs which were taken of the accused in police uniform upon his arrest on 1st December 2016 and comments on how much the uniform suits him, how handsome and upright he looks and how commanding of respect he is. The disgruntled police aside, PO is celebrated. Upon sentencing the magistrate even asks PO whether a sentence of 12 months would be acceptable. 'Yes Sahr', PO replies with a smile.

The magistrate regains his seriousness before closing the case and exclaims that 'such acts should not be encouraged in society because they have the propensity to undermine and bastardize the Sierra Leone Police Force. There are laid down procedures for enrolment into the force and such acts [of impersonating] should be nipped in the bud' (Admin [2017] 2020). But since this rounds up a 20-minute conversation characterised by mockery, his final words are drowned in the crowd's laughter.

I start speaking to PO after he sent me a note from the accused's bench at the opposite site of court, much like schoolkids do when the teacher does not pay attention. I observed the note moving from hand to hand and only realized it was for me

because 'white woman' was written on the front of the neatly folded scrap piece of paper. 'What are you doing here? Let us talk', was written on the note.

I spoke to PO often thereafter and he always had an agenda. He had been in and out of prison countless times and Pademba Road did not scare him. It had never been his intention to escape the law; if anything, he was deeply surprised that he did not get caught earlier. When the driver who got him arrested refused to pay the fine PO wanted and demanded they go to the police station, PO could have just left. Instead he followed the driver to the police station to be caught, thereby submitting to his own arrest.

In 'The Aesthetics of Vulgarity', Achille Mbembe develops Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the obscene and the grotesque as modalities in the postcolony through 'which subordinates reaffirm or subvert power' (Mbembe 2001: 133). Mbembe demonstrates how power can be inverted when 'the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology, and when power, in its own violent quest for grandeur, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence' (133).

In this way, impersonating a police officer is much more than an act of resistance to PO's own marginalization. Rather than openly protesting an oppressive system, PO takes on the subject position of the oppressor (Freire [1970] 2005). Yet he knows that eventually he will be caught; in fact, getting caught completes his dramaturgy. Through exposing wrongdoing with wrongdoing, his performance exposes the police's weakness.

In his study of the West African Hauka, who use mimicry and mockery to negotiate colonialism, Paul Stoller argues that respondents 'mimicked the white man to "master" him, to tap into his extraordinary power so that it might be recruited for local uses' (1995: 196). By embodying the oppressive, corrupt force of the police officer and turning him into a ridiculed mascot of 'everything that is wrong with the state', PO turns power usually used *against* marginalized groups such as himself into power that works *for* him and against oppressive institutions. PO thus showed how 'pretence (*le simulacre*) becomes the dominant modality of transactions between the state and society, or between rulers and those who are supposed to obey' (Mbembe 2001: 129).

In the eyes of journalists and attendees, PO becomes the beloved trickster who is faithful only to the oppressed and marginalized. By taking from the rich, PO is interpreted as using crime against the criminals. In court, he therefore speaks to the 'complexities of public feeling that cannot readily be made articulate' (James 2003: 101). While institutional failures are often hard to expose, PO's case serves as a symbol for confirming public yet unproven knowledge of corruption and mismanagement that is fed by and intertwined with long-term structural violence (Dentith 2013: 46; Wigmore 2015). In exposing how state personnel exploit the poor through 'beating the system with its own weapons', as the journalist sitting next to me says, PO offers 'laughter alongside melancholy' (Piot 2010: 19).

PO's case shows that embodying the trickster is one powerful way in which inmates may simultaneously accept the subject position of the criminal and

redefine it. It is a redefinition that questions the given structures of criminality, its moral and ethical underpinnings and the right and wrong of certain practices. This position simultaneously mobilizes the support of like-minded social groups. In fact, elements of the trickster can be seen in the Professor's, PO's and Joker's cases. The Professor manipulates people and information while Joker negotiates his own advancement through performing the role of a useful and trusted friend, and PO finds his heroism and his coping tactics in the ethical; through his actions, he causes his own downfall in the name of supporting a bigger cause.

With his social networks spanning prison and city, PO embodies Wacquant's notion of a continuum. His life relates to Manuela da Cunha's notion of prison as a 'hyper-total institution' where social relations transcend the boundaries of prison and city as 'webs of relations and meanings flow across and remake both worlds' (2008: 346).

### **Of tactics and strategies within and beyond walls – a power bargaining**

Whether we see imprisonment as the manifestation of a continuum whereby already marginalized groups feed the prison system, or as a mechanism through which certain individuals are immobilized and locked away, what the two models have in common is that through structures of punishment prisons attempt to produce specific citizens (Foucault 1977: 135), often by attempting to strip inmates of specific subject positions, as well as of the possibility to (re-)define themselves independently. However, the case studies above demonstrate that inmates do not simply submit to these practices of exclusion and creation. Rather, they attempt to create their own spaces of agency. Michel de Certeau's (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies facilitates an understanding of these processes. While a strategy requires the ability to plan and to exercise controlled power over an environment from a distance, tactics are isolated executions of agency within a particular setting (De Certeau 1984). Therefore, the criminal justice system operates strategically. Its laws and regulations are enforced by a network of institutions such as police stations, courts and prisons whose employees carry out its 'will and power' (De Certeau 1984: xix). Their procedures take place in isolated environments that follow logics of subjugation. While the public cannot access these institutions without adhering to prescribed rules of contact, let alone control them, the criminal justice system can enforce its reach over everyone. Its power to put on trial and punish enables the construction of 'criminals' who are confined in separate spaces of prisons. The level of communication of inmates with the outside lies in the hands of criminal justice personnel and thus often depends on their compliance with the criminal justice strategy.

However, far from giving in to this subjugation, inmates at Pademba Road react 'tactically' to their environment. While they are unable to deconstruct the prison, through isolated actions they seek to (re-)negotiate their subject position within the prison structure whenever an opportunity arises.

Sunny's tactics can be seen as micro tactics in that they neither deconstruct the system in place nor create a counter system. Instead, they are characterized

by complete apathy, a state that allows him to retreat from the grasp of the prison, thereby lessening the prison's power over him. For PO, both the crime he committed and the resulting imprisonment were tactical considerations aimed at widening cracks in the state's exploitation and social stratification strategy. Both Joker and the Professor, though in very different ways, created a life in prison and thus built and developed social connections there. Rather than letting the criminal justice system define their subjectivity, these respondents created counter positionings and counter narratives within the confines of the prison.

The Professor's actions may be interpreted as a quasi-strategy. Through a set of strategic practices, he manifests his ability to negotiate with the 'exterior' and to extend his reach beyond the prison. What is more, he actively structures prison life through being a red band and through his business – positions of power that enable him to shape prison governance and to command others. This power has a clear limit, however, in that it is dominated by the criminal justice system and is unable to do away with the prison.

Hence, this article has shown that both scholarly approaches – that of treating prisons as separated 'spaces of exclusion' (Bauman 2000) and that of 'carceral continuums' (Wacquant 2001) – are equally relevant. Through focusing on both the individual and on social groups, each model showed that imprisonment is never a neutral consequence of a wrongdoing; rather, it is shaped by larger symbolic and literal nexuses of power, politics and inequality. And yet the two are to be seen neither as absolutes nor as opposites. While some prisoners' circumstances fall within one category or the other, most experience an assemblage of the two. What is more, any circulation between prison and 'ghetto' is gendered. Although both men and women, boys and girls may experience this circulation, in Sierra Leone their circles are separated as they move in and out of different correctional facilities. Hence, they remain consistently on the 'outside' of each other's lived experiences.

In the Sierra Leonean context, some young people's life-worlds, such as that of PO, encompass the prison and the shanty town as they and their loved ones circulate in and out of Pademba Road. In the endeavour to secure livelihoods, communities and the prison become important sites of mutual influence as much as the trajectories of marginalized groups are kept separate from the profitable pathways of mainstream society. But while imprisonment might be a state of impermanence and temporality for some, for others, like Sunny, prison is the location holding captive an annihilated self, entirely excluded from social networks of reciprocity after a social death. For Joker, prison is a place of dying vis-à-vis the outside world and rebirth within the prison through the networks he forms. For the Professor, prison is the permanence of his existence.

In this prison alone, each prisoner featured in this article has developed a unique response to his situation – from complete withdrawal into the 'inside', to an insouciant flaunting of subjection to the law, to different forms of appropriating power and enacting resistance. Assuming a homogeneity of prison experiences therefore hinders an embodied, inductive understanding of prison as lived. If we are to take seriously the role of anthropology in contributing to a more nuanced

appreciation of prison and confinement, we must move beyond models of carceral continuities and factories of exclusion. Instead, we must render visible, not erase, these dividing lines that differentiate prison experiences and the dance of power that shapes positioning. This will enable us to offer distinct analyses that complicate one-dimensional models while still offering succinct and sharp analyses that can achieve a more holistic and accurate understanding of the role and place of prisons and of experiences and consequences of imprisonment for individuals, social groups and societies in our contemporary world.

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## Notes

1. Certain identifying characteristics and facts have been changed to protect the identity of those who wished to remain anonymous. All respondents chose their own aliases.
2. One cigarette costs between Le 500 and Le 1000 in prison, while a whole pack can be bought for Le 500 in the city.
3. This can include anything from murder to collecting hidden money and visiting someone.
4. This leaving of prisoners had been discussed as one of the major problems during many of my interviews. John, one of Don Bosco's prison social workers, told me that especially inmates whose sentence is about to end or those with significant material or social resources can negotiate to be let out of prison at night as long as they are back in the morning.

5. This popular song is performed by the Sierra Leonean musician Treasure. It was produced by White Flag Artists in 2012. It was played on radios and through social media and continues to be widely heard in the country. The YouTube video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BF3UyvAP5xk&list=PL601CCE0707BC2DD5>. (accessed 17 November, 2019)
6. In his file, it is stated that Sunny is eighteen years old.

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