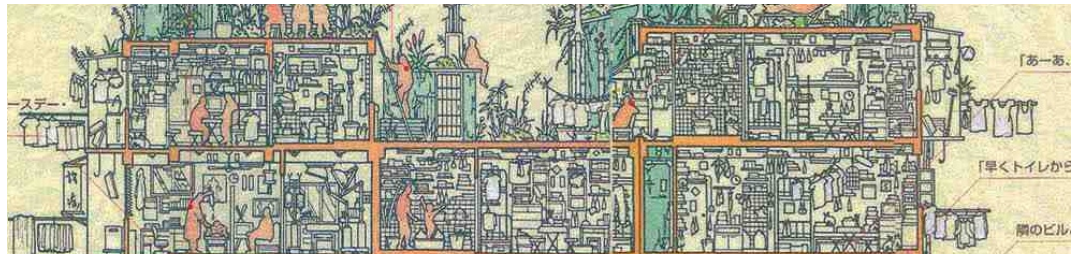


CONFINEMENT

WORKING
GROUP



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The ambivalence of social relations in a US juvenile detention facility for girls

Monday, November 7, 3:00pm-4:30pm

Hagerty Hall 451

The political exigency of critical prison studies propels scholars to document the gross injustices inherent to the explosion of carceral society in the US. No one writing in critical prison studies disagrees that prison is violent, dehumanizing, and deeply marred by racism, heteropatriarchy, and class precarity. Core to these projects is an understanding that prison, jail, and juvenile detention spaces are designed and organized to maintain docile prisoner populations. Prison guards and staff carry out policies within these spaces that both structure their work in antagonistic juxtaposition to prisoners and energize their attentions toward any hint of prisoner resistance.

US carceral space developed historically and exists today only so that state institutional and facility staff control can be effectively and efficiently accomplished over prisoners. Simply put, carceral sites prioritize routinized time-spaces and compliant prisoner bodies. These are achieved, scholars show, from a range of ugly institutional and personal staffing tactics including isolation, extensions to sentences, brute force, gross displays of favoritism and sexualization, and the coercion of prisoners to be informants on others' digressions. The contemporary prison simultaneously uses systems of classification to rank prisoners, who are then threatened with demotion of status, loss of privileges, and even loss of wages when behavioral expectations are breached. This "post-disciplinary" prison utilizes the science of self-discipline to avoid "bad discipline," and the extending reach of this approach offers a range of privileges for the most docile and compliant of the incarcerated.

What is less likely to be considered in critical prison studies – and what I will consider in this paper – is the vast range of social and institutional relations that just do not fit into the control apparatus leading to these overwhelming conditions of a controlled prisoner population. In my research at a juvenile correctional facility for young women, I was just as likely to witness love, affection, rules-skirting, and kindness between staff and girls and between girls themselves, as I was to see the strict enforcement of rules. Of course, I witnessed acts of arbitrary meanness on a weekly basis during the two years of my research, and love can also serve to meet the demands of control and coercion. The goal of this project is to think through the ambivalent relations of relations in detention space and the effects of that ambivalence on adolescent girls.

The issue that I wish to highlight in this paper is how to consider the complex sociality of carceral space that gives rise to ambivalent relations even within the subjugation of prisoners (also Sweeney 2010). How can we theorize prison space as productive of relations that do not merely serve the interests of the carceral state and in fact, can even undermine the uniformity and horrors of institutional space? Is there room within our understandings of carceral space to accommodate kindness and love, even as we keep constant attention to the apparatus of cruelty and control that exists across different kinds of facilities? Finally, how can we consider sexual relations between adult staff and girl detainees within this framework (or is it too politically difficult to accommodate sexual relations in the argument)?

Inquiries about this event can be directed to Melissa Anne-Marie Curley (curley.32@osu.edu)