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Transforming Space? Spatial Implications of Yoga in Prisons and Other Carceral Sites

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Abstract

Yoga programs have taken root, and in some cases flourished, in carceral sites across the globe, yet few scholars have examined this phenomenon from critical theoretical and qualitative perspectives. The goals of this paper are to explicitly link scholarly discussions of yoga in prisons with theoretical developments in criminology, sociology, and human geography, and to use these diverse perspectives to develop a theoretical understanding of the possibilities and limits of yoga as a transformative spatial practice in carceral settings in and beyond the prison. Drawing on qualitative data collected on prison yoga, primarily in Canada, this paper considers three lines of theoretical inquiry: first, it examines yoga classes as an “institutional display” that facilitate social interaction between prisoners and community members, yet also serve administrative interests; second, it considers the possibilities for yoga spaces to enable forms of emotional expression that may not be permitted in other areas of the institution; and, third, it discusses the effects of carcerality on the practice of yoga beyond prisons. The paper draws heavily on the emergent field of carceral geography, as well as sociological and criminological research, to advance these arguments. In presenting these theoretical analyses, this paper advocates for a deeper theoretical exploration of the multiplicity of spatial meanings of yoga in carceral settings.

Keywords: Yoga; Prison; Space; Incarceration; Carceral Geography

Introduction

Prisons and other sites of incarceration may appear as unlikely sites for the widespread practice of yoga. Nonetheless, in the past four decades, yoga programs have taken root, and in some cases flourished, in prisons and other carceral sites across the globe. While researchers have investigated many aspects of prison yoga programs, few scholars have examined this phenomenon from critical theoretical and qualitative perspectives. With the recent rise in scholarly interest in the socio-spatial implications of prisons and other sites of incarceration, coalescing in the emergent field of carceral geography (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018), crucial questions about the spatial meaning of yoga in and beyond the prison arise.

My goals in this paper are to explicitly link scholarly discussions of yoga in prisons with theoretical developments in criminology, sociology, and human geography, and to use these diverse perspectives to develop a theoretical understanding of the possibilities and limits of yoga

as a transformative spatial practice in carceral settings. Drawing on qualitative data collected on prison yoga in Canada, I consider three lines of theoretical inquiry: yoga classes as an “institutional display” (Goffman 1961) that facilitates social interaction between prisoners and community members, yet also serves the interests of prison administrations; the possibilities for yoga to transform prison spaces and permit forms of emotional expression that may not be readily presented in other areas of the institution; and the effects of carcerality on the practice of yoga beyond prisons. In presenting these theoretical analyses, I advocate for a deeper theoretical exploration of the multiplicity of spatial meanings of yoga in carceral settings.

Context and Review of Literature

A Brief History of Yoga in Prisons and Other Sites of Forced Confinement

The precise origins of yoga practice in situations of forced confinement or imprisonment are unclear. However, a platform for the current proliferation of prison yoga interventions was created by prison yoga organizations in the U.S. in the 1970s and United Kingdom in the 1980s; they worked within a broader movement to encourage meditation and mindfulness practices among prisoners (Integral Yoga Magazine 2008; Prison Phoenix Trust n.d.). Meanwhile, a Canadian Catholic nun who studied in Japan to become a Zen master began leading yoga classes for political prisoners in the Philippines in the early 1980s. This experience led her to help the UK-based organization expand its outreach to prisoners and, eventually, to launch Canada’s first prison yoga organization in 2003 (Gerster 2013). From these origins, prison yoga programs have proliferated globally. Today, prison yoga classes are offered in numerous countries in addition to those already mentioned including Australia, Austria, Belgium, Colombia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, India, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan.¹ Furthermore, yoga programs are currently offered in other sites of forced confinement beyond prisons, such as camps for refugees and migrants in Greece (Fallon 2018) and Jordan (Yoga Mandala Project n.d.). This is clearly an incomplete sketch of the global history of carceral yoga, and there are doubtless other unpublished histories in diverse settings around the world. Nonetheless, this overview helps contextualize the contemporary provision of yoga to prisoners in Canada.

In Canada, various organizations deliver yoga programming to incarcerated individuals. Because the Canadian corrections system splits the responsibility for administering sentences between provincial and the federal governments,² these organizations work in diverse settings. For example, New Leaf Yoga (<https://newleafyoga.org>) operates in secure custody youth centres in Ontario, while Yoga Outreach (<https://www.yogaoutreach.com/>) runs classes in British Columbia in both youth and adult provincial institutions. Meanwhile, in 2013, Freeing the Human Spirit partnered with the John Howard Society, a national prisoner advocacy organization, to reach male prisoners in the federal system across the country (Gerster 2013).

While the specific characteristics of these yoga programs in prisons, or other sites of confinement, will depend on numerous factors – including a jurisdiction’s dominant penal philosophy, the regulations imposed by particular correctional administrations, differing types or levels of institution, and the skills, experience, and philosophy of local yoga instructors – there are some notable similarities across these diverse programs. Furthermore, as I discuss throughout this paper, there are compelling theoretical reasons to understand shared characteristics of carcerality across diverse sites, even while recognizing the many nuanced differences between them.

Prisoners: A Marginalized Population

There are approximately 10.7 million people imprisoned around the globe, including those in pretrial detention (Walmsley 2018).³ In many Global North countries, beginning as early as the 1970s, there has been a dramatic rise in prison populations and incarceration rates. These trends, which are a consequence of increasingly punitive systems of policing and punishment, most severely affect racial minorities and the poor (Gilmore 2007; Wacquant 2009). The increased use of incarceration is connected to broader sociopolitical shifts, including the rise of neoliberal “workfare” policies and intensified policing of racialized people, particularly young men (Wacquant 2009). As Gilmore (1999, 174) suggests, writing specifically about the U.S., “the expansion of prison constitutes a geographical solution to socio-economic problems, politically organised by the state which is itself in the process of radical restructuring.” As these critiques highlight, incarceration is neither inevitable or equally distributed throughout society.

While Canada has not experienced the same degree of mass incarceration as many other Global North countries, its criminal justice system nonetheless reflects the country’s power differentials and social inequalities (Griffiths 2011). These unequal power structures are borne out in the prison population. Black prisoners account for nearly 10% of the federal prison population, despite Black Canadians accounting for just 3% of the country’s population (Sapers 2013). The incarceration rates of Indigenous Peoples are even more strikingly disproportionate, as they account for just 4% of the adult Canadian population, yet comprise nearly one quarter of the federal prison population (Sapers 2014). Wacquant’s observation that prisoners are “a population thrice stigmatized [because they] are law-breakers who are overwhelmingly poor and darker skinned” appears strikingly relevant in the Canadian context (2002, 387).

Although the prison population is overwhelmingly male, with men and boys accounting for approximately 93% of the world prison population,⁴ there has been more than a 50% increase in global female incarceration rates since 2000 (Walmsley 2017). While many of the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958) are experienced universally, in other ways the detrimental experiences of incarcerated men and women are gendered (Zaitow 2003). In Canada, for example, not only are men more likely to be incarcerated, they also endure violent carceral environments in which they must selectively perform different masculinities as part of “calculated efforts to produce safety and govern uncertainties of prison life” (Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat 2015, 493). Meanwhile, Canadian women prisoners may receive greater administrative oversight that, under the guise of progressive and humane approaches to punishment, exerts coercive control over women’s lives and bodies and aims to paternalistically shape their behaviors (Hannah-Moffat 2001). Finally, regardless of their gender, incarcerated populations have higher rates of mental health problems than non-incarcerated populations, the effects of which are exacerbated by incarceration (Durcan and Zwemstra 2014).

Yoga in Prisons: Complicated Meanings, Diverse Outcomes

Yoga is a broad term encompassing numerous styles that have diverse histories and emphasize different combinations of physical, spiritual, mental, and/or political elements. Arising from complex processes of colonization, globalization, and cultural hybridity, aspects of Indian Hindu yoga were appropriated and adapted in the Global North beginning in the 19th century as part of a larger physical culture movement focused on bodily and health discipline (Singleton 2010); this process provided the impetus for the eventual global growth of posture-based yoga and its commodification as an exercise-based practice for a largely wealthy, white clientele (Page 2016). This process has meant that yoga can carry diverse meanings, many of

which are not anchored in the practice's historical and spiritual roots. For example, among other meanings, yoga can variously be understood as a spiritual discipline (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005), a vehicle for social justice and peace-building (Quiñones, López, and Lefurgey 2018), and a commercial lifestyle and fitness activity (Lewis 2008). Even within research on prison yoga there has not been a standard definition with various programs emphasizing one or more of breathing, postures, or meditation (Muirhead and Fortune 2016). Given the complexity of these meanings, I deferred to the experiences of instructors and formerly-incarcerated participants as they defined their experiences of yoga. As such, throughout this paper, I employ a broad definition of prison yoga as “a physical cultural practice that links bodily movement, in the form of a series of established poses and a focus on breathing, to mindfulness and meditation” (Norman 2015, 81).

Given the intersecting forms of marginalization in incarcerated populations, it is worth considering what yoga looks like in prisons and whether yoga can provide prisoners with social and health benefits that might mitigate these conditions. As highlighted in recent reviews of the literature, much of the academic research on prison yoga examines how the practice may contribute to incarcerated people's rehabilitation and well-being through encouraging behavior and physiological changes (Auty, Cope, and Leibling 2017; Muirhead and Fortune 2016). While much of this literature approaches prison yoga from a “what works” standpoint – that is, it attempts to pinpoint precise behavioral outcomes for participants – a handful of researchers adopting a more critical, and often qualitative, approach have attempted to explore more fully the complex spectrum of social meaning that prison yoga can carry. Rucker's research in a U.S. prison examined how a restorative justice yoga program enabled prisoners to experience “self-directed exploration” that contrasted sharply with the coercive treatment programs to which they were often subjected (2005, 118). Grier and Clot-Garrell considered prison yoga in Catalan, Spain as a “holistic activity” that carried multiple meanings as “symbolic resources through which inmates can make sense of their uncertain situation and (re)construct their self-image while also working as a ‘peace-making mechanism’ that fits in with the institutional order” (2015, 142). Meanwhile, Norman (2015) argued that, whereas more traditional prison physical activities, such as team sports or weightlifting, can reinforce violent and exclusionary social hierarchies, prison yoga in Canada is frequently structured by instructors to emphasize values such as peacefulness and self-awareness; as such, it may offer a more pleasurable and meaningful range of experiences for some prisoners. Collectively, these studies suggest a diverse and complex range of social benefits that participants can derive from participation in prison yoga.

However, there is another side to yoga's social significance in prisons: its use as a form of social control over the behavior of prisoners. Norman (2015) explored how prison yoga programs may contribute to a neoliberal agenda that individualizes criminal behavior, encourages prisoners to make “constructive” use of their time and become “law-abiding citizens,” and uses systems of rewards and punishments to discipline prison populations. Absent from such rationales for prison yoga is a consideration “of prisoners' personal or collective pleasure, fulfillment, or health” (Norman 2015, 93). Grier and Clot-Garrell similarly problematized a straightforward reading of the “benefits” of prison yoga, noting that “rather than sometimes empowering inmates, [holistic activities such as yoga] become tools adapted for reinforcing and maintaining institutional order” (2015, 151). Given that powerful groups have historically deployed sport and other forms of physical activity to control populations considered “dangerous” or in need of “reform” (Hartmann 2001) – usually along intersecting lines of race, gender, and class – it is not surprising that prison administrators may see yoga as serving a

similar social control function. Further, as Moore and Hannah-Moffat (2005) note, programs whose aim is offender rehabilitation may act as a “liberal veil” that obscures the punitive nature of a corrections regime.

Further, as prison yoga programs have gained prominence, they have become the target of criticism from advocates of a punitive approach to prison management. For example, in 2011 in the Canadian province of Ontario, Conservative Party leader Tim Hudak criticized the provision of yoga in prisons: “I have a problem with prisoners getting Zen yoga classes while moms who have had their kids murdered can’t get access to the compensation fund” (as cited in Talaga 2011). Such framing of yoga as a perk for undeserving and violent criminals, contrasted with the suffering of victims of violent crime, contributes to the stigmatization of prisoners and ignores the potential benefits of activities such as yoga for prisoners. It also raises questions, with regard to rehabilitative programming, of the principle of *less eligibility* – that is, the idea that “if imprisonment is to act as a deterrent the treatment given to a prisoner should not be superior to that provided to a member of the lowest significant social class in the free society” (Sieh 1989, 159). As prison yoga grows in popularity, it seems likely that there will be further pushback from tough-on-crime advocates against prisoners receiving classes whose cost many non-incarcerated citizens cannot afford.

Methodology

While my focus in this paper is largely theoretical, I draw selectively on qualitative data from interviews, which I gathered as part of a larger doctoral project on sport, physical culture, and health in Canadian prisons (cf., Norman 2018). As part of this doctoral research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with former federal prisoners (seven men, seven women) and yoga instructors (seven women) who led yoga classes for prisoners in the Canadian federal, provincial or youth corrections systems. Interviews varied in length between approximately 30 and 120 minutes. I recorded, transcribed, and inductively analyzed the interviews to identify emergent themes, and I assigned pseudonyms to participants to ensure confidentiality.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews permitted me to ask guiding questions about participants’ experiences with and views on physical activities, including yoga, in carceral settings while allowing participants to guide the discussion and delve deeply into areas that they wished to discuss. As such, this process allowed me to develop rapport with participants and yielded rich insight into their involvement with prison yoga. While most former prisoners I interviewed had some awareness of prison yoga programs, not all had participated in them. As such, the voices of former prisoners are less prominent in this discussion than they are in the overall project on physical culture in prisons. Although my data collection was limited in scale, this paper nonetheless illuminates key aspects of prison yoga, permits for an initial analysis the spatial significance of yoga in carceral settings, and lays a foundation for deeper and theoretically nuanced qualitative explorations of carceral yoga programs and spaces.

Theoretical Framing

To sketch some initial analysis of prison yoga and space, I employ diverse theoretical approaches. In the first analysis section, I draw primarily from Erving Goffman’s sociological analysis of *total institutions*,⁵ which are “place[s] of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time,

together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961, xi). Total institutions (which include a diversity of sites beyond prisons) impose significant tolls on their residents’ abilities to construct a unique sense of self, as they are ritually stripped of their self-identity upon entry, assigned the new, lowly status of “inmate,”⁶ and deprived of the social and material resources through which they might develop an alternative sense of identity (Goffman 1961). Despite the “total” descriptor, total institutions are in fact permeable to outside people and objects, and Goffman is attentive to movement into and out of these spaces (Schliehe 2016). One manifestation of these flows of movement are the occasional hosting of exceptional events, called *institutional displays*, in which “inmates” and staff cooperate to present a positive image of the institution to outsiders (Goffman 1961). As I discuss later in this paper, the complex social and spatial meanings of these displays facilitate a rich analysis of yoga programs run by volunteers from the communities.

In the subsequent two sections, I unpack the spatial significance of prison yoga by engaging with recent theoretical developments in criminology and the emergent interdisciplinary field of carceral geography. These perspectives recognize that prisons are “complex sites of multiple political, economic and social activities, meanings and affects” (Norman and Andrews 2019, 2); that prisons share important characteristics with other “compact” spaces of forced confinement (e.g., migrant detention camps); and that the “carceral” is manifested and experienced outside of such sites through “diffuse” technological and social apparatuses (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018). In the second analysis section, I consider the relationship between yoga, emotional expression, and prison space. Specifically, I draw from criminological research on prison “emotion zones” (Crewe et al. 2014) that examines how certain institutional spaces can be transformed to permit forms of self-presentation that, due to subcultural and structural factors, may not be permissible in other areas of an institution. In the final section, I discuss yoga and carcerality beyond prisons with particular focus on the “compact” and “diffuse” nature of carcerality (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018). This analysis reflects on the implications of yoga in other carceral spaces (e.g., refugee camps) and its interaction with the embodied effects of incarceration on released prisoners.

Yoga and Carceral Space: Some Theoretical Considerations

The remainder of this paper considers three theoretical approaches that can deepen the theoretical understanding of yoga and carceral space. This analysis fills a significant research gap: despite recent theoretical advances in carceral geography, the spatial significance of physical activity in prisons has received minimal attention. Indeed, only a handful of studies deeply consider the socio-spatial implications of this important aspect of prisons’ social worlds (Gacek 2017; Norman and Andrews 2019), while other research on prison physical activity offers initial considerations of space, even if this was not the primary focus (Martinez-Merino et al. 2019; Norman 2017). Furthermore, research on the politics and representations of prison rodeos in the U.S. – a problematic spectacle in which prisoners dress in exaggerated “convict” costumes and perform dangerous rodeo activities for the entertainment of paying members of the public – sheds light on socio-spatial aspects of physical activity and the complex meanings that are created in interactions between prisoners and outsiders. Schrift (2004, 2008), for example, notes that prisoners may receive material and symbolic benefits from participating even as the exploited participants are exposed to extreme danger and made objects of ridicule. Meanwhile,

the event “provides a public theater that engages its audience in an unapologetic voyeurism” of prisoners bodies and the prison space (Schrift 2004, 342).

Despite these important scholarly contributions, there remains a dearth of research on the significance of physical activity in carceral spaces. The following discussions, therefore, offer some potential ways forward in a consideration of critical socio-spatial aspects of yoga in and beyond prisons.

Social Interaction Across the Prison Boundary: Yoga Classes as Institutional Display

Despite the fact that prisons may appear impermeable and static, thanks to imposing security boundaries (e.g., walls, fences, guard towers, and/or razor wire) that seem to bound an institution from the outside world, carceral mobilities scholars have demonstrated that there is in fact a great deal of movement – of people, material objects, and ideas – into and out of prisons (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018). One way in which such carceral mobility is manifested is in regular visits by volunteers, who assist with the provision of recreational, spiritual, educational, or therapeutic programs to prisoners. In Canada’s federal prison system, for example, over 6,000 community members volunteer with various prison programming (Correctional Service of Canada 2017) and research on leisure programs in women’s federal prisons has suggested that volunteers can play a part in building prosocial relationships between community members and prisoners (Fortune and Whyte 2011).

Yoga classes in prisons are often organized and led by individual volunteers from the community or non-profit organizations. In Canada, this use of outside teachers differentiates yoga from other forms of physical activity, which are typically organized by prison staff working in a department of recreation or on an ad hoc basis by prisoners themselves (Norman 2017). In the context of a total institution, this feature of yoga classes makes them both sociologically significant and distinct from many other forms of physical activity. Specifically, yoga classes represent an example of what Goffman (1961) refers to as *institutional displays*, which are occasional events in the institution in which members of the outside community participate and the usual social hierarchy and system of rules may be relaxed. Institutional displays, which are part of a larger category of *institutional ceremonies*, are one way in which the social world of a total institution, which is largely cut off from the community, maintains a connection with the outside world (Goffman 1961).

Like other volunteer-led recreational activities, yoga classes allow opportunities for controlled and prosocial relationship-building between community members and prisoners. Instructors that I interviewed reported that they enjoyed very positive interactions with their students and received a great deal of gratitude for their volunteerism. As one instructor explained: “[After a class], all of the men would come up to me afterward and shake my hand and thank me for coming.” Speaking more broadly, former prisoners consistently expressed similar sentiments about the importance of interaction with community members. As one man said: “It was a huge deal ... Interaction with the community, it makes a difference”.

Such sentiments toward community volunteers suggest that prisoners gain personal value from their participation in volunteer-led yoga classes, and are aware that they would not occur without the instructors sharing of their time and expertise. Goffman suggests that institutional ceremonies allow “inmates” to enjoy “role releases” from their usual lowly status within the institution, and it may be that this opportunity to assume an identity beyond that of “prisoner” or “criminal” is a crucial source of satisfaction for prison yoga participants (1961, 94). One former

male prisoner, speaking broadly about community involvement in providing physical activity and sport, supported such an interpretation:

Guys wanted to do their best, wanted to be seen as more than cons, be seen as really sports-minded. People from the community would ... see, 'hey, these guys are just normal guys too, they like doing the same things we do.' All of a sudden they didn't see you as a headline in the paper.

While not specific to yoga, this quotation highlights that institutional displays are significant for facilitating community social interaction, particularly for prisoners who have few opportunities to be seen outside of the social role of "inmate" or criminal offender (Goffman 1961).

Despite these potentially positive aspects of yoga for prisoners, there is another side to institutional displays that must be acknowledged. Goffman (1961) is clear that, although "inmates" may receive benefits from these exceptional events, they are also complicit in helping the administration promote a positive public image of the institution. First, institutional displays typically occur in particular parts of an institution, permitting outsiders only a partial look at the spaces of the prison and enabling the institution to put on its best front (Goffman 1961). In the case of yoga in Canadian prisons, participants described classes typically occurring in spaces such as a chapel, a gym, or a classroom, all of which are likely to be reasonably well-maintained and more presentable than other rooms of the prison. Second, only certain "inmates" are selected to participate in institutional displays, and by participating willingly (often enthusiastically, according to many of the interview participants), they contribute to constructing a humane and benign image of the institution. In fact, yoga programs may be used as a reward or perk for compliant and "well-behaved" prisoners rather than being widely offered to the prisoner population, even where other prisoners may benefit from the classes. As one instructor described it, gaining access to the yoga class was "a privilege in the institution" that the administration made available only to prisoners who met certain behavioral standards. In this way, yoga can function as a form of administrative social control (Norman 2015).

Goffman (1961) highlights conflicting meanings of institutional displays through his observation of baseball games staged between residents of a psychiatric hospital and a community team:

In exchange for being allowed to demonstrate [positive qualities beyond their inmate identity], inmates through their intermural team convey some things about the institution ... The inmate team demonstrates to outsiders and observing inmates that the staff ... are not tyrannical, and that a team of inmates is ready to take on the role of representing the whole institution and allowed to do so (107).

This passage makes clear that, in an institutional display, whatever benefits accrue to the "inmate" also serve a function to the administration's management and presentation of the institution, particularly in downplaying or obscuring many of the problematic practices that occur in the institution's "back stage." Thus, although my participants' experiences indicate that yoga as an institutional display offers a rare opportunity for prisoners to enjoy meaningful social interaction with yoga instructors from the community, it also occurs on the terms of, and in the interest of, the prison administration. Future research on carceral yoga as institutional display could more deeply unpack these complexities in nuanced and sociologically insightful ways.

Transforming Space: Yoga, Prison Spaces, and Emotional Expression

Numerous studies demonstrate that prisoners regulate their emotional expression in order to survive or get by in prison environments (Caputo-Levine 2013; Greer 2002; Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah Moffat 2015). Women prisoners may attempt to avoid emotional expression due to life experiences that have underdeveloped their individual emotional resources, the risk of administrative sanction, or a fear that vulnerability may open them up to exploitation by other prisoners; as such, there is an “emotional tightrope women prisoners must walk” in their daily lives and social interactions (Greer 2002, 125). Male prisoners, meanwhile, carefully regulate their emotional expression to minimize risk and vulnerability in different institutional contexts, including threats to their physical safety, identity or legal status (Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat 2015). In prison environments with a high threat of peer-on-peer violence, “presenting, or looking tough is just as important for masculine presentation as actually being tough” (Ricciardelli 2014, 49-50). The “carceral habitus” of male prisoners may, therefore, involve careful management of bodily comportment and facial expression, such as the adoption of a “yard face” characterized by an unsmiling face and a “blank expression” (Caputo-Levine 2013, 175-176).

Recent criminology research has offered nuanced understandings of how prisoners express emotions in different spatial and social contexts within an institution (Crewe et al. 2014; Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat 2015). Crewe et al. (2014), in an analysis of social interaction in a British men’s prison, observed a variety of spaces, or “emotion zones,” within a prison where “many of the normal rules of the prisoner society were partially or temporarily suspended, permitting a broader emotional register than was possible in its main residential and most public areas” (67). For example, interactions between workout partners in the weight room could express “sublimated forms of intimacy” (66-67) while in other spaces, such as cooking or ceramics classes, prisoners could express generosity, camaraderie, and vulnerability in ways they could not in other settings (67-68). Even more notably, the prison’s visiting room, where prisoners met with family members, was a space in which “prisoners showed forms of warmth and tenderness that were taboo on the landings ... The visits hall was a sacred space of sorts” (67).

The concept of emotion zones (Crewe et al. 2014) is of particular salience for the spatial analysis of prison yoga. Participants in this study described a variety of prison spaces in which yoga was practiced: collectively in gyms, classrooms, chapels, or cell ranges, and individually in cells. Some of these spaces, such as chapels or cells, are areas in which a wider range of emotional display may be permitted; others, such as a range, are not. This opens up the question of whether certain prison spaces can be temporarily *transformed* into emotion zones through the embodied practice, allowing those areas to be sites of emotional expression not usually permitted in that space. One yoga instructor explained how, despite the fact that the location of class could vary even within the same institution (“we take what we can get”), she intentionally constructed the class as a “safe space” in which prisoners could express emotional vulnerability, and enjoy greater self-reflection by asking staff to remain outside the room and playing soothing music:

The guards were on the outside, so it was really just [the instructor and prisoners], which allowed the guys to be more expressive and more real ... There would be times in this class that it would be completely quiet. Completely. And that’s just an alternative way to experience the world. There’s no slamming doors, no one’s yelling, no one’s talking, it’s

just you and yourself ... We also had music. So music would drown out any [background noise] ... They always asked for the music. Because the music also created a safe space.

Former prisoner participants also offered some insight into the relationship between yoga, emotional expression or management, and prison space. One female former prisoner explained to me that it was crucial that classes were held in the chapel as it was “the only serene place [in the prison] where you can take the time out to get into that level you need to for yoga.” Meanwhile, a male former prisoner discussed how the relative privacy afforded in his cell made it an ideal space in which to practice yoga, especially during times of increased stress and emotional strain:

If somebody got killed in the institution and you’re locked down for a month or whatever, so now you’re in your cell, so what do you do? How do you learn how to relax? ... When something would happen, the whole institution would, everybody’s on edge, so you could be in your cell and just do some yoga and just relax and chill out. And you could do it in [a small space] ... I ended up getting rid of my bed and just had my mattress I could roll up, so I could do my yoga in my cell. And that way, if you’re locked down for two or three weeks you could still exercise and still do your [yoga].

These quotations speak to the intersection of space and emotion in the contouring of prisoners’ experiences with their yoga practice. Further, they highlight the possibility for yoga practices to transform, temporarily, carceral space through specific forms of social interaction, physical movement, sound or silence, and the presence or non-presence of people in particular roles (e.g., having staff stay outside of the room).

A major absence in this analysis is the salience of race to prisoners’ emotional expression in and through yoga. With one exception, this issue was not raised by my interview participants. However, one participant – a woman who has worked with prisoners in a variety of physical and therapeutic recreation capacities, including yoga – specifically mentioned that the structure of physical activities in prisons is alienating for Indigenous prisoners:

There’s so little of our justice system that fits with Indigenous way of knowing and Indigenous culture and their whole practice of restorative justice ... The usual ‘go to the gym and work out’ is not traditional for Indigenous folks and I don’t think it’s even crossed anyone’s minds to think ‘what does physical activity look like [to Indigenous prisoners] and what would be important about that?’

With the extreme overrepresentation of Indigenous People in Canadian prisons (Sapers 2014), this is clearly a crucial issue for Canadian yoga instructors and organizations to grapple with.

There is much for researchers to further unpack with regards to the spatial and emotional implications of prison yoga, especially as it helps to create safe spaces for emotional expression or temporarily transforms the permissible emotional range in certain areas of the prison. Notably, the intersection of race (and gender, class, and sexuality) with emotional expression in and through prison yoga remains unexamined. Nonetheless, as I have discussed in this section, the ways in which yoga permits particular forms of emotional expression in specific prison spaces lends support to Crewe et al.’s (2014) assertion that prisons contain “a more complex emotional topography than most accounts of prison life have suggested” (67).

Beyond Prisons: Yoga and the Carceral

One of the most significant theoretical developments in the carceral geography literature is the recognition that the forms, effects, and spatial manifestations of carcerality extend far beyond the prison (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018). Moran, Turner, and Schliehe (2018)

distinguish between “compact” and “diffuse” forms of carcerality, a distinction that enables an examination of prison yoga’s significance in and beyond prisons in this section.

“Compact” carceral sites are those “which resemble the prison both in functional form and in mode of operation,” such as detention centers and secure custody youth centers (Moran, Turner and Schliehe 2018, 669). As discussed previously, yoga programs have proliferated not only in prisons, but also in refugee and migrant detention camps. Although the people housed in these sites have not been charged with crimes, their day-to-day lives “are based on forms of control and limitation of mobility ... Their spatialities are all too often structured around former carceral institutions, and adopt forms of disciplines of a carceral kind” (Altin and Minca 2017, 32). There is a lack of research that examines yoga and space in non-prison “compact” carceral sites. However, given the carceral characteristics of camps for refugees and migrants, the transformative possibilities of yoga would appear to hold similar potential in these spaces.

Research on “diffuse” forms of carcerality has considered the “ways in which the prison seeps into its surroundings; ... the porosity of the prison boundary itself; and ... a mobile and embodied carcerality” (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018, 670). For former prisoners, “diffuse” effects of their incarceration may be felt in a variety of ways after their release, including the ongoing stigma of being seen as “offenders” or “criminals,” and the implications of this label for their employment prospects and personal relationships (Maruna 2012), or the challenge of adapting their ‘carceral habitus’ (i.e., their embodied ways of acting and self-presenting in order to navigate and survive prison life) to life in the community (Caputo-Levine 2013).

“Diffuse” forms of carcerality can have consequences for former prisoners’ yoga practices, especially where their embodied experiences of incarceration affect their life post-release. As Moran notes, “the corporeal inscriptions acquired during incarceration act to construct bodily subjectivities which intersect with other embodied characteristics, in particular social class, to stigmatise and disadvantage released prisoners” (2014, 36). Some former prisoners I interviewed explained that, despite their best intentions, they experienced difficulty in maintaining physical activity routines once they left prison. These participants cited barriers to activity, such as poor physical or mental health arising from their incarceration, the cost of gym or yoga studio memberships, and a fear of stigma in the community due to their criminal histories. For example, one male former prisoner noted the lingering effects of a stigmatized criminal identity, stating: “When [prisoners] come out, it’s ‘you’re still a scumbag.’ So it’s just [another form of] punishment.”

As Wacquant (2002) points out, the stigma of being a (former) prisoner is frequently compounded by racial and class discrimination. My conversations with yoga instructors revealed some ways that this “diffuse” effect of incarceration can restrict former prisoners from accessing yoga spaces in the community. In particular, instructors noted the high cost of classes and the largely white and middle-class yoga clientele found at commercial yoga studios as deterrents to such ongoing participation by former prisoners (Blu Wakpa 2018; Lewis 2008; Page 2016). For example, one yoga instructor described the typical clientele of yoga studios as “middle class white women in Lululemon.” Given that prisoners in Canada are racialized and classed – being disproportionately drawn from Indigenous or Black and low-income communities – this social construction of yoga studios appears to act as a barrier to ongoing participation by former prisoners.

Further, this race- and class-based exclusion is spatial. Commercial yoga studios are a space in which a sense of “community” may be cultivated based on individualized consumerism among a relatively racially, economically, and politically homogenous group (Blu Wakpa 2018).

Additionally, the geographic location of yoga studios typically reflects their clientele and thus acts as a spatial barrier for people from underprivileged or under-resourced communities. For example, one yoga instructor told me that the commercial studio she regularly taught at was located in an upper-middle class neighborhood and drew a “privileged” clientele. The studio was geographically isolated from the poorer area of the city where many former prisoners and their families resided. As such, she said, “it wasn’t going to draw on those communities.” These are important socio-spatial considerations for understanding why yoga spaces may be inaccessible for former prisoners wishing to continue their practice in the community.

As this analysis highlights, there is a need to broaden our understanding of prison yoga beyond the physical space of the prison in order to explore how yoga is practiced and experienced in other “compact” carceral sites or through “diffuse” forms of carcerality. This section has provided some initial considerations that, I hope, lay a foundation for future research in this area.

Conclusion

This paper has argued both for a deeper theorizing of the spatial implications of yoga in prisons and a broader understanding of its role in carceral spaces beyond the prison. Given that spatial analyses of carceral sites are relatively rare and difficult to conduct, it not surprising that prison yoga’s socio-spatial significance has yet to be deeply unpacked. Yet, as yoga programs continue to gain traction in diverse carceral spaces, there is a need to better understand and critique their spatial implications. Prison yoga organizations see their work as benefitting, perhaps even liberating or transforming, prisoners’ lives, and there is evidence to suggest that such claims may have some validity in certain instances. However, as the analysis presented in this paper indicates, there are many ways in which the spatial characteristics of carcerality problematically counteract the potential of prison yoga – either because the practice advances the prison administration’s aims, as in institutional displays;⁷ because the spatial transformation yoga permits are unsustainable, as in the construction of emotion zones; or, because the effects of incarceration are embodied and extended well beyond the duration of a prison sentence. Further research into these, and other spatial complexities, will help deepen and broaden the theoretical understanding of yoga in prisons and other carceral spaces, and will provide fresh insights for scholars and practitioners alike.

Notes

¹ As per an online directory hosted by the Prison Mindfulness Institute (n.d.).

² The Canadian federal government is responsible for the incarceration of adults serving sentences of two years or more, while each province is responsible for the imprisonment of adults serving sentences of less than two years (Public Safety Canada 2015). Provinces are also responsible for youths (12-18 years old) charged with a crime, including those placed in secure custody centers (Department of Justice 2015).

³ The term “prison” encompasses a wide range of correctional institutions, and there are major differences between corrections systems in different jurisdictions and types of prison (e.g., maximum versus minimum security) within the same system. These administrative differences have very significant consequences on the development of social arrangements, sub-cultural practices, and conditions of confinement within specific institutions. Given this paper’s broad theoretical focus, it draws upon frameworks that consider the broad characteristics of incarceration in prisons, while recognizing that prisoners in diverse settings may have very different experiences of confinement.

⁴ Canadian statistics do not deviate significantly from these trends: men account for 94.4% of prisoners, while women make up 5.6% of the prison population (Walmsley 2017).

⁵ Goffman's scholarship on total institutions has been critiqued by several carceral geographers. As such, it may appear incongruent with a critical spatial analysis of prison yoga. However, as Schliehe (2016) persuasively argues, a close reading of Goffman's (1961) *Asylums* reveals a nuanced treatment of everyday life and spatial fluidity in prisons and other similar institutions.

⁶ The use of the word "inmate" has been criticized as dehumanizing and stigmatizing by former prisoners, scholars, and people working in the justice sector (Hickman 2015; Law and Roth 2015). Recognizing the problematic nature of the term, I deploy it in this paper only in two instances: 1) where it is part of a direct quotation; and 2) where, with specific reference to Goffman's (1961) conceptualization of total institutions, it is used as a sociological term to describe a person with a subordinate status within such an institution. In the latter cases, the word is placed in quotation marks.

⁷ Although, as has been alluded to, participation in institutional displays *does* provide some tangible benefits to some prisoners including material, social and/or psychological benefits. As such, institutional displays are complex social phenomena that highlight some of the many tensions that arise from incarceration.

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