

Jails unprisoned

Peripheries celebrates five years and seven published editions

*Little bird, so much to explore
Touch down to rest
About the bars, he sings
Kelly Rhey*

The poem above was written by a woman deprived of liberty in a creative writing

workshop at the Foz do Iguaçu Prison for Women. Kelly told her workshop peers that she was inspired to write the poem by the surprise she felt when she saw a bird that could be outside insisting on entering the prison. The text is built on not knowing what the bird is doing there, despite its ability to choose any other place. A suggestive way to read the poem starts with the assumption that the bird must have reasons for being there - rather than being there out of naivety. What if the bird was doing what was best for it? What alternatives could he have outside?

In the poet's specific referential space — the city's female prison unit — we know that a few decades earlier, that bird would have found a lush Atlantic Forest where it now finds a dry wasteland, scorched earth, with four prison buildings standing tall. One might figure that the little bird goes to the prison without ever having been arrested by a police officer because the prison complex did not offer it better alternatives: perhaps it's the only place where it can feed and interact with other beings. Following this interpretation, the poem points to something that penal abolitionists have repeated over and over: prison does not affect just the lives of people deprived of liberty and their families; it affects everyone, although it is very selective in who it affects in what way.

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*¹ Seven Stories Press, 2003., Angela Davis wrote that the prison system “relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism.” That means that prison serves not only to detain and control certain bodies but to stop or prevent fundamental social changes. That is why a project of radical social change must necessarily include penal abolitionism. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have similarly written that the goals of abolitionism is “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, (...), therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society”²The University and the undercommons (<https://hemisphericinstitute.org/pt/emisferica-11-1-decolonial-gesture/11-1-essays/the-university-and-the-undercommons.html>).

Periferias 7, Jails Unprisoned, is published in four versions, in Portuguese, English, Spanish and French, just like the journal’s very first edition, *The paradigm of potency*, from 2017, and all others since. That, dear reader, was the edition that paved the way for *Periferias* to also become a publisher, with headquarters in Maré, Rio de Janeiro, which would publish 20 books by 2023.

The *Periferias* editorial projects for both its journal and books foster traditions, literatures, philosophies, poetry, wisdoms and practices, images, and utopias from *Global Peripheries*, focusing on people and their intersections. This focus is the root of the questions we address in our publications: race, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, territoriality, public education, public safety, confronting the war on drugs, mass incarceration, as well as Roma, migrant and refugee issues, among others.

Periferias 7 goes beyond denouncing the racist and perverse logic that fuels the prison system, seeking to present alternative paths to the violent and authoritarian bases of prison

systems that feed on state violence against the population, especially in the peripheries.

This issue features Cristiane Checchia and Mario René Rodríguez Torres as guest editors. Both are professors at the Federal University of Latin American Integration (UNILA) and coordinators of the *Right to Poetry* program, an extension project that develops reading circles and creative writing workshops in prisons in Foz do Iguaçu, South Brazil.

Periferias 7 publishes work by people and collectives from eleven countries. They

report and analyze the depth of problems brought on society by mass, selective incarceration, and propose work on different fronts to find alternatives, either in the form of concrete action and disincarceration policies or in the form of envisioning a new society in which prisons no longer make sense.

They are actors who work against the currents historically established by the prison system to make visible and audible what prison institutions make great efforts to hide. They are people who act in the pursuit of reestablishing social bonds undone by prison. They are the actors making the bodies, the senses, the life prison holds flow. “We work to transform pain into movement and movement into freedom”, Chilean feminist collective Pajarx entre Púas says — a statement that could very well be the motto of this edition.

We know that the link between prison and the reproduction of social, gender, race and class inequalities is not accidental. We interviewed intellectual Juliana Borges, a prolific anti-prison activist who has been fundamental for the diffusion and understanding of the prison issue in Brazil and how it is inescapably linked to the country's slave-owning past and racist structure.

Retired judge and associate justice, human rights activist, and one of the founders of the Association of Judges for Democracy (AJD) Kenarik Boujikian shares her critical reading of the Brazilian justice system — far from the mission entrusted to it by the 1988 Constitution: protecting the rights of the entire population. Boujikian argues that a significant level of disincarceration could be achieved simply by following basic principles of justice with a focus on its social dimension.

The series of massacres that have occurred in Ecuadorian prisons in recent years are addressed in an interview with Andrea Aguirre and Elizabeth Pino, from the Mujeres de Frente collective, who offer a possible explanation of the situation and present some of the “feminist anti-penitentiary actions” that the collective has been developing for the past 18 years, inside and outside prisons in Ecuador.

In Brazil, the National Agenda for Disincarceration is a citizen program that proposes ten concrete guidelines for reducing the country's prison population. The Agenda was created in 2013 by social movements and organizations that are opposed to the Penal State, and, especially in recent years, has promoted, the creation of state chapters, including the Disincarceration Front of Paraná. We interviewed three of its members — one from a prison ministry, one relative of a person deprived of liberty, and one former inmate who is now a journalist — who share their experiences of the prison system.

From the perspective of the Black Men in Politics (HONEPO) project - an initiative promoted by the Maria and João Aleixo Institute -, geographer Osmar Paulino argues that statistical data and reflections on current representations of black youth in Brazil demonstrate how black boys continue to be pushed into a “zone of non-being”.

Criminal selectivity and racism in Brazil are evident: Amabilio Gomes Filho, the son of migrants from northeastern Brazil, now lives in Nova Holanda, one of the 16 favelas that make up the Maré Favela in Rio de Janeiro. From there he weaves his narrative about invisible walls and bars that lead to prison, even after one leaves.

Dirceu Franco Ferreira and Samuel Tracol address the connections between

contemporary prisons and Latin America's colonial past, starting from the context of the pandemic and the strong social tension evidenced then in prisons in different countries, to think about the long history of prison in Latin America: from early modernity and Iberian penal colonization, through the punitive aspect of the creation of the territory, to the present and the challenges of imagining a future without prisons.

Traces of penal colonialism inscribed on our continent remain on the island of Saint-Joseph, off the coast of French Guiana. Gloria Alinho developed an essay in which images of a visit to the ruins of an old prison where people arrested by the French Empire suffered and died are superimposed. Letters, images, roots, and vegetation are intertwined in the remains of the buildings and promote a reflection on time and history, human memory, and nature.

Situations of violence that push members of the LGBTIA+ community to prison reproduce a cycle of renewed violence in prisons. The actions of the Colombian collective, Cuerpos in Prisión, Mentés en Acción (“Bodies in prison, minds in action”) are based on mutual care and self-care to protect the LGBTIA+ community from punitive violence in prisons in that country, where homosexuality was still considered a crime as recently as a few decades ago.

The legal system does not treat *travestis* as “people who can, but rather who must have committed the crimes of which they have been accused”. Victor Siqueira Serra analyzes the criminalization of travestis in *Can't you see the street from your office window?* The study of a hundred cases involving this population makes him question the suitability of prosecutors and judges in first and second instance courts to make decisions about the fate of marginalized people who live so very far from their privileged offices.

One of the bonds most cruelly and painfully undone by prison is the one which binds mothers with their young children. Pájarrx entre Púas addresses the situation of vulnerability

faced by mothers who give birth and care for their babies inside of prison in Chile. They share initiatives of resistance and reparation through the arts that they carried out in Valparaíso's women's prison. One of these projects, project *Nido* ("nest"), offered incarcerated mothers the chance to write children's stories for their daughters and sons. Two of these stories are published in this edition, as well as recordings made by women deprived of liberty which can be accessed by QR code, one of many initiatives developed by Pájarx entre Púas ("Birds in barbed wire").

From inside the Atlacholoaya women's prison, in the state of Morelos, south-central Mexico, the collective Hermanas en la Sombra ("sisters in the shadow"), conducts feminist identity writing workshops, a response to two observations: first, that "it is essential to re-educate society to fight the stigmatization and criminalization of people deprived of liberty, especially women"; second, that it is necessary to "work with them to develop tools that allow them to build autonomy and community". Feminist identity writing, which helps imprisoned women gain visibility, makes it possible to strengthen self-esteem and build mutual bonds. The Jade Sorceresses is a group of women who were released from prison during the pandemic and received training from the Hermanas en la Sombra collective to act as facilitators of feminist identity writing for other women, showing what they learned and putting it into practice, for the first time, at the Morelos Center for Recovering Addicts. Their story is shared in this edition.

The creative writing experience in prisons resonates in La Plata, Argentina, in a literary workshop with men deprived of liberty, conducted by writer Carlos Ríos. Starting with writing dictionary entries, the exercise raised a series of questions among the participants, regarding the (apparent) rigidity of the language, the objectivity of conventional dictionaries, and linguistic authorities. By writing their own entries, participants saw themselves as subjects capable of intervening in their language, opening it to new meanings from their own experience.

Disseminating literary and artistic experiences in prisons such as those plays a crucial part in the effort to create new forms of relating to oneself and others, in movements that involve other, less punitive understandings of justice.

We need to speculate fictionally, starting from the small alternatives already

manifested in our daily lives to oppose a reality that imprisons our imagination and prevents us from thinking about fundamental social change, as suggested by some of the American publishers and authors in the conversation *The fictions and futures of Transformative Justice*. Walidah Imarisha is one of them, and has now published her short story *Rememory*.

Art in the age of mass incarceration is a translated excerpt from the book *Making Time: art in the age of mass incarceration*, by Nicole R. Fleetwood³ Harvard Press, 2020.. The author addresses art making inside US prisons and discusses what tensions this production poses in the world of contemporary art. The text shows the complexity of relationships that surround “prison art”, made by incarcerated people, but involving fine art market dynamics and institutional control over this production. Nicole R. Fleetwood offers a conceptual discussion of art primarily through examples of American artists Ronnie Goodman, James “Yaya” Hough, Todd (Hyung-Rae) Tardelli and Muhammad al Ansi.

Abir Khaled and the Rojava Information Center (RIC) describe how restorative practices are based in prisons for both civilians and Islamic State prisoners, in the prison system run by the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria.

Theater being a space of collaboration, respect, sharing, and engagement can be a path for individuals in prison to reinvent themselves. Ashley Lucas, theater professor at the University of Michigan, shares her experience on South African soil, when she encountered specific aspects of the prison issue in Johannesburg, in an article presented by the theater director and professor, Vicente Concílio.

Hagai El-Ad, director of the Israeli organization B'Tselem writes about Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's first biography. Journalist Denny Rubinstein wrote the story of this historical icon of the Palestinian resistance in Hebrew. At a time when political uncertainties increase for Israelis, the apartheid structure that imprisons Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip remains endless. There are possible avenues for alliances between Palestinians and people and movements in Israeli civil society who are outraged by the daily human rights violations promoted by the state and by Israeli supremacists. These alliances can strengthen the struggle to defend the dignity of Palestinian lives, as well as the cultural, religious, and literary identity of the historic Palestinian resistance.

In memory of Bira Carvalho (1959 - 2021), we published his and Davi Marcos's photographic essay of the General Department of Socio-Educational Initiatives (Degase), in Rio de Janeiro, as part of the project "Right to Health in the Socio-educational System", born from a partnership with the British universities of Stirling, Strathclyde and Dundee.

Beginning, middle and a new beginning

In 2020, the Maria e João Aleixo Institute (IMJA) was invited to join the international research network MIDEQ — Migration for Development and Equality — which brings together research institutions from 12 countries in the Global South and is dedicated to studying the phenomenon of migration in these countries in order to support the creation of public policies that guarantee fundamental rights for the migrant population. In Brazil, we are focusing our research on the country's Haitian immigrant population with whom we also collaborate on initiatives. Accessing Rights in South-South Migration will be the theme of Periferias 9, scheduled for publication in September 2023.

Periferias 8 special issue Litafrika. Artistic Encounters will be published in June 2023, partnering with Zukiswa Wanner, Stiftung Litar and Strauhof Museum.

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May *Periferias*, dear reader, feed your sense of justice and of indignation against conservative logic, and enrich your imagination with new possibilities of how to think and live democracy radically.
