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“Whoever Dies, Dies”: A Pedagogical Model for Understanding the COVID-19 Outbreak in United States Prisons

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A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half of the United States prison population, or five times the rate found in the general population, had been infected. Limited social distancing and difficult to implement preventative measures helped to spread COVID-19 in prisons, while many incarcerated individuals felt that government policy prevented their ability to self-care. These feelings of alienation reflect a history of policy that links disease to deviance and social death. Based on the written self-reflections of anthropology students in Wisconsin prisons, this article outlines an ethnographic and pedagogical model for analyzing pandemic policy. Students learned to relate anthropological terminology to their critiques of policy and revealed how prisoners adapted to feelings of invisibility and hopelessness during a pandemic.

Key words: critical pedagogy, metaphor, adaptation, deviance, social death

Introduction

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I asked a group of introductory anthropology students to write about the effects of the pandemic on their daily lives as prisoners. An outbreak was sweeping through the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WDOC), and many of these students felt invisible to policymakers. Peter, a thirty-year-old African American man from Milwaukee, wrote:

> As prisoners, we’re considered to be the scum of the earth by most. After a conviction, it’s as if we’re no longer considered to be citizens of the United States. This pandemic has brought a few issues to the light as far as our Black lives, and racism, but the beast and the enemy is very much still alive and breathing. With COVID-19, there is little to no concern when it comes to our lives. The prison guards aren’t tested before they come to work. There is no protection from this virus. The WDOC’s solution seems to be, let it in, and whoever dies, dies. Who cares? We’re just state property. The disenfranchisement doesn’t stop.

Others in the class made similar references to what Peter called the “beast”: a systematic form of dehumanization and suffering experienced within carceral institutions. Despite a well-documented pandemic response on the part of the WDOC, students felt that policy had ignored their physical and social well-being.

United States prisons were hotbeds for the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly half of the United States prison population, or five times the rate found in the general population, were infected (Toblin and Hagan 2021). By May 2021, more than 400,000 incarcerated people in the United States were infected by the virus, and more than 2,700 had died (The Marshall Project 2021). In some regions of the United States, incarceration was a more significant predictor of COVID-19 transmission than race, gender, or class (Reinhart and Chen 2020), and the pandemic was particularly prevalent in “outside” communities that had higher incarceration rates (Lofgren 2021). With incarcerated patients being released early for home-based and hospital care, accounting of an outbreak that appeared to be spreading from prisons and into communities became hard to track (Turcotte et al. 2021).

Throughout the pandemic, I taught an online “Introduction to Anthropology” course for incarcerated students housed across eight WDOC facilities. Ranking 35th in COVID-related deaths per prisoner and 27th in overall COVID-related deaths, Wisconsin was a “middle of the pack” example of the challenges faced by United States state prison populations (The Marshall Project 2021). For example, one genomic study of a Wisconsin prison conducted between August 2020 and October 2020 showed that infections spiked from less than a dozen to 1,095 as the result of a one-time transfer of six inmates (Hershow et al. 2021). While the CDC and WDOC quickly reported the outbreak’s epidemiological conditions, the two agencies offered limited insight into how incarcerated individuals managed quarantine in their day-to-day lives.

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In contrast, in a series of weekly responses during the same period, students in my course routinely reported slippages in quarantine protocol and described the types of actions that could prevent the loss of life. The class was modeled after Paulo Freire's (1971) problem-posing pedagogy and developed an anthropological vocabulary grounded in the "culture concept" (i.e., Tylor 1871) and forms of post-modern critique. Over the course of three semesters (January 2020 to May 2021), students submitted more than 600 pages of self-reflections about anthropological concepts, including over 100 pages about COVID-19. I encouraged students to relate critiques of COVID-19 policies to culture concepts learned throughout the course. The key concerns mentioned by students included the lack of coronavirus prevention measures, social strategies taken by the incarcerated to adapt to extended periods of lockdown, empathy towards populations struggling with COVID-19 outside of prison, and a hope that the pandemic would bring about an abolition of the carceral state. As someone who read writing from incarcerated students on a weekly basis, I found that their everyday traumas, concerns, and adaptations to quarantine were routinely absent from official policymaking.

This article ethnographically distills the self-reflective writings of incarcerated students as they reacted to a COVID-19 outbreak. Their anthropologically informed critiques relating to concepts such as culture, kinship, sensory ethnography, and the carceral state demonstrate how marginalized communities adapt to experiences of social death during a pandemic. This case study offers a collaborative model of pandemic analysis that focuses on the day-to-day practices made by a markedly vulnerable population.

Metaphors for Social Death

Disease, criminality, mass incarceration, and pandemic response share a similar rhetorical space. Historically, criminality and deviance have been described as "diseases" that threatened the social body (Lombroso 2006). Acts against authority were viewed as individual biological and physiological traits that could be cured through "expert" treatment. Policing, epidemiology, and city planning developed contemporaneously during the industrial age to shape ideas of social and biological hygiene on the urban margins (Gaber and Write 2015; Garmany and Richmond 2020; Holloway 1989). Eighteenth-century prisons were considered revolutionary in that they sought to cure socially these deviant behaviors through humane disciplinary methods rather than through violent corporal punishment (see Foucault 1975). This criminality-as-disease paradigm theoretically connects socioeconomic status, health conditions, and moral judgment with the practical act of screening individuals for the likelihood of future criminal activity.

While 21st-century prison officials and scholars are often more critical of the criminality-as-disease rhetoric, citing the paradigm's ethically prescriptive and scientifically dubious foundations (Munthe and Radovic 2015), politicians and the public continue to mobilize this pejorative discourse and influence policies of incarceration. "Broken Windows" policing promoted by New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani in the 1990s provide one of the more problematic blueprints for contemporary hygienist policies that equated socioeconomic inequality, criminality, and individual moral failure (Amster 2003). The policy, like many hygienist policies, was roundly critiqued for promoting racial profiling and harming the same communities that were intended to be "cured" of crime.

Some contemporary scholars have argued that mass incarceration—rather than criminality and deviance—is a social "plague" (Drucker 2013). Incarceration plays a significant role in "structural violence" (Farmer 2004), an inescapable chain of inequalities that produces early death and generational traumas. Incarcerated individuals are often simply shuffled back and forth between prisons and neighborhoods with high rates of incarceration (Wacquant 2010). Even upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals become stuck in a cycle of poverty, precarity, and generational trauma. For example, prisons can act as disease multipliers and "epidemiological pumps" within marginalized communities where many incarcerated individuals originate (Reinhart and Chen 2021). In doing so, the disease spreads the negative effects of incarceration beyond prison walls and contributes to extrajudicial trauma in already marginalized communities.

Wisconsin's prisons exemplify how the COVID-19 virus feeds off structural violence. The state has the nation's highest rate of African American incarceration (Pawasarat and Quinn 2013). Milwaukee, Wisconsin's largest city, has often been called "America's most segregated city" (Mollica and Luthern 2019). Milwaukee's 53206, a predominantly African American zip code where many of my students come from, is the city's poorest and least educated (Mollica and Luthern 2019). The city also has the highest incarceration rates in the state and one of the highest in the country. In 53206, an individual is nearly as likely to be incarcerated for breaking technical rules and committing misdemeanors (e.g., missing a meeting with a social worker, associating with former criminal associates, having contact with police, or driving without a license) while on supervised release rather than for committing a new felony or indictable offense that applies to the non-supervised population (Collins 2020). Demonstrating the effects of structural inequality, 53206—Wisconsin's poorest, least educated, and most incarcerated zip code—also has the highest risk for COVID-19 in the state (Neighborhood Health Partnerships 2021).

By obscuring how inequalities overlap, incarceration plays a significant role in the political invisibility and "social death" of marginalized individuals (Sowle 1993). According to Susan Sontag's (1989) seminal work on the AIDS pandemic, marginalized populations afflicted with illness become socially invisible. The most feared diseases—such as leprosy and syphilis—scar the physical body and alienate individuals from the social body. Pandemics are seen as a punishment for moral failure and encourage authorities to shame and blame segments of society already seen as pariahs (Sontag 1989).

Rather than overtly withholding treatment, the metaphorical connection between disease and deviance disguises systematic health inequalities and discourages institutions from taking public health threats seriously.

The COVID-19 crisis has metaphoric parallels to previous epidemics (Craig 2020). Much like Sontag described AIDS as a new cancer, COVID-19 has been equated to AIDS (Singer and Rylko-Bauer 2021). Stigmatizing metaphors such as criminality-as-disease help to sustain structural violence and social death. Referring to the cancer epidemic, Sontag (1978) points to how military metaphors are used to frame disease and social deviance as a national enemy. Similarly, marginalized communities are vilified through the rhetorical "war on crime" and "war on drugs," and the users of illegal narcotics are often vilified as the source of social and biological disruption. As a result, pandemic quarantine, wartime concentration camps, and prisons can promote a similar curative method that isolates individuals and prevents them from fully participating in society.

In policy terms, the COVID-19 pandemic has modified how the judicial system treats deviance, including by implementing mask mandates while also de-prioritizing the prosecution of drug use in domestic spaces (Abrams 2021). For the incarcerated, pandemic quarantine compounds how judicial order controls most elements of their daily life. Hand sanitizer is banned due to its inebriating properties; crowded cells make social distancing impossible; masks, vaccines, and other supplies are hard to attain; and complaints to guards about people showing signs of illness often fall on deaf ears. These structural conditions obscure the relationship of COVID-19 to other forms of authority, make self-care far more precarious during a pandemic, and lend to feelings of systematic dehumanization.

Incarcerated individuals can also show signs of agency and adaptation to the cyclical forms of violence and social death that emerge during the pandemic. Adaptation is an inherent aspect of incarceration (Crewe 2012) with prisoners forced to comply to penal power and embrace moral reflexivity (Jarman 2020). COVID-19 ultimately forced incarcerated individuals to adapt in relative isolation and without a full suite of social, educational, and recreational activities normally afforded to many in United States prisons. In student responses for my course, individuals routinely contemplated how pandemic policies could be improved to prevent the loss of life and described adaptations to quarantine protocol that counteract feelings of social death. Through a demonstration of pandemic agency, prisoners reveal how to disrupt systematic traumas and challenge the metaphors that perpetuate their status as deviant.

Developing a Pandemic Prison Classroom

The pandemic coincided with a moment of renewed interest in prison education programs as a means to reduce recidivism and reform the United States carceral system (Marcus 2021). In 2015, after more than fifty years of inmates being locked out of government financial aid for higher education, the federal government slowly loosened restrictions through the Second Chance Pell Grant pilot program. Since 2018, I have taught an asynchronous online university-level "Introduction to Anthropology" course sponsored by Second Chance Pell grants and hosted by a two-year associate degree program at the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). Participants were housed across eight Wisconsin prisons, including male and female facilities, and all were within two years of release. Education was seen as an essential aspect of their return to the outside world.

I communicated with students entirely through written evaluations, emails to on-site coordinators, and an online "Moodle" educational platform. Most learners only had access to a "closed" intranet and a computer lab during business hours. In several prisons, learners had the opportunity to use *Android* tablets to complete work in their cells.

Initially, readings and lectures were nearly identical to courses that I taught both in-person and online at a public four-year university. I recorded video lectures where I spoke over a PowerPoint presentation that outlined course material. Students read *Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Anthropology* (Brown et al. 2017), a text that is organized and published by the American Anthropological Association. I guided students through the history of anthropological thought, from Edward Tylor's "complex whole" (1871) to Audra Simpson's (2016) discussion of refusal. We watched documentary films that have been staples in anthropology courses for the last quarter-century, such as *The Ax Fight* (Asch and Chagnon 1975), *A Kalahari Family* (2002), and *Paris is Burning* (1990). I also balanced this more traditional anthropological curriculum with readings that discuss criminal justice in Wisconsin.

Throughout the development of this course, I embraced Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1971). Freire asks students to *name* social problems, *reflect* on those social problems, and determine a way to *act* through continued dialogue. This dialogic model encourages non-hierarchical learning that lends equal value to the perspectives of teachers and students. A critical pedagogy in an anthropology classroom, particularly when centered on the social problems of incarcerated students, reaffirms the university as a radical space that challenges dominant economic and social models through participatory, reflective, and inclusive critique (Randall 2020). Prison education programs and Freire's critical pedagogy share a goal of deepening the student's understanding of their relationship to authority and knowledge (Novek 2019). By critically describing their identities and experiences, incarcerated individuals have the opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth and a value of the knowledge they bring to the world (Evans 2018).

Reflecting Freire's dialogical approach, I made clear of my positionality and encouraged participants to reflect on their own experiences. Despite being recommended not to do so for reasons of security by the WDOC, Second Chance training, and my colleagues at MATC, I shared personal details about my life throughout my video lectures. I grew

up in Milwaukee and its suburbs and could relate to many of my students who had the same experience. However, as a university-educated, White male who has never been incarcerated, my experience was distinct from most of my students. Through written responses, I learned that students came from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. While some of the students had a middle-class upbringing and access to university education before incarceration, there were also students who had lived in unstable and economically precarious households and had only earned high school degrees well into their 30s. Students also discussed diverse experiences that did not align with my own, defined by race, gender, and class. Student experiences with alienation, social death, and the COVID-19 pandemic were similarly varied.

With the pandemic unfolding rapidly, my teaching goals became somewhat of a "moving target" (Rodwell 2021). The speed of social change seemed "untenable" for many students and educators and made adapting to ongoing disruptions or anticipating new policy changes a precarious daily practice (Hardy 2020). Delays in services, lockdowns, and closures within prisons often targeted classrooms first. During these disruptions, I slowly modified the course by focusing on the critical intersection of the prison and the pandemic. I introduced new lectures, shared news articles, and modified previous course questions to reflect the social world created by COVID-19. Early on in the pandemic, I encouraged students to see quarantine, contagion, and self-care as central vocabulary terms for the course alongside anthropologically informed terms such as cultural relativity, ethnography, and postmodernity.

Methods for Analyzing the Writing of Incarcerated Students

In the spring of 2021, during an escalating COVID-19 outbreak in Wisconsin prisons, I received institutional review board approval from the WDOC and MATC to archive the weekly writings of fifteen students. Students had the right to consent and were given access to my research protocol. I attempted to separate my interests as an educator and a researcher by reviewing consent forms, archiving responses, and beginning analysis only after course grades had been submitted. As part of my post-classroom ethnographic analysis, I filtered out relevant examples related to the questions of culture by highlighting the use of key course vocabulary and the discussion of COVID-19 in prisons. During the archiving and writing-up process, I gave participants pseudonyms and omitted identifying information beyond mention of age, race, gender, and region of origin.

By archiving the weekly self-reflective writing of incarcerated students, my data collection mirrored a "correspondence method" (Maycock 2021; Walker et al. 2017). A correspondence method—based on letter writing— works well when in-person research is untenable in situations such as a pandemic. By incorporating writing that students were already submitting, data collection required no additional labor on the part of prison staff or students nor technical modification to the communication process.

Prison and classroom research is historically fraught with unequal power relations. Ethnography has sought to counteract problematic forms of research authority through polyvocality, dialogue, and opacity, even when the nature of research collaboration is not easy to define (Lamphere 2020). A collaborative ethnography strives to mobilize community members as equal partners in all phases of research, including the definition of problems and solutions, the collection and interpretation of data, and dissemination of findings (Lamphere 2018). Projects like Inside-Out have brought incarcerated students and traditional students together as ethnographic collaborators. Inside-Out programs reflect a trend towards "political action research" that seeks critical intervention through the act of academic inquiry (Payne and Bryant 2018). When the pandemic made in-person conversations untenable, a dialogue through weekly writing assignments represented one of the few opportunities to present critiques of prison policy. Documenting prisoner critiques of pandemic policy became a political act when other forms of research and communication were limited.

Problematically, "member-checking" (Lincoln and Guba 1985)—or asking for students to assess the accuracy of research—was not possible within the months following in-class correspondence. A combination of factors prohibited follow-up interviews during the pandemic, including restrictive communication rules, the lack of on-site coordinators for extended periods, the early release of students, and the large number of students involved. However, students were repeatedly made aware of my desire to document knowledge about COVID-19 in prisons through a combination of weekly announcements and direct responses to student writing.

Paralleling the work of Freire, my dialogic model of analysis capitalized on the intertextual meaning that is created by reading (i.e., naming), writing (i.e., reflecting), and communication (i.e., acting) over long periods of time (Harvey 2015). While this model may not present the same type of validation as member-checking, a process of intertextual synthesis resembles a holistically agentive research collaboration (Harvey 2015). The excerpts below attempt a perspective of the pandemic prison that remedies the fractured nature of communication, respects the critiques made by the incarcerated, and offers insight into the forms of social death and adaptation that they embraced.

Prisoners Describe Disease in Prisons

In the first weeks of the course, I asked students to imagine an ethnography of a prison pandemic. The class read excerpts from Geertz's "Thick Description" (1973), and I encouraged students to see multiple layers of meaning created by COVID-19. Responses revealed how incarcerated individuals were skeptical after repeated forms of dehumanization at the hands of a carceral system.

Joyce, a twenty-something White woman who grew up in rural Wisconsin, writes:

> There has been miscommunication and misguidance for the inmates at my facility. Currently, the ones that didn't get sick with COVID-19 are being tested every two weeks. I was just tested today for COVID-19, I have not been sick, nor do I want to get sick. We had an institution-wide shut down for months a few times. We've been off lockdown for about two and a half months now and were waiting on the vaccine. Some of the older inmates have received the vaccine. I would study the ratio of people that want the vaccine, to those who do not. I would need a lot more information on COVID-19 than I'm provided with in prison. I think this environment breeds mistrust of those in authority, and I think that a high number of people will refuse the vaccine simply for this reason…. If we could record this you would see a lot of women locked in cells, loitering in hallways when available and very lost souls whenever limited movements are temporarily reopened.

Joyce describes a series of issues that were outside of the analytical purview of traditional research carried out by the WDOC. Joyce then suggests that an additional threat of the pandemic, beyond the disease itself, is a mistrust of carceral authority that prevents prisoners from seeking treatment. These experiences lead to a feeling of alienation (i.e., "lost souls") and critiques of shifting socio-spatial habits (i.e., "loitering in hallways.")

Peter, who wrote about social death in his first week's response, also describes the various interpretations that incarcerated people form of the pandemic and vaccines:

> Some people see COVID-19 as a death sentence while others hardly experienced it at all and consider it a sham. Then discussing issues like vaccinations is almost like you're speaking about a political matter. It's that touchy.

Peter adds to Joyce's response by bringing to light how incarcerated experiences of a pandemic prison are not monolithic. Opinions about vaccines differ among prison populations much like they do in the broader population. When analyzing how incarcerated individuals adapt to social death during a pandemic, observers must account for a difference of opinion and experience.

Kinship, Social Death, and Adaptation

COVID-19 disrupted mourning rituals and our ability to process life and death (Bitusikova 2020). One of the principal ways that incarcerated individuals experience social death is through isolation from family (Guenther 2013). Social death is compounded by an inability to grieve the loss of a loved one because of physical isolation (Segal 2016). Student writing reflected a tension between experiences of social death via the loss of kinship ties and a desire to reconstitute forms of kinship while in pandemic quarantine. Rebecca, a thirty-something White woman who grew up in rural Wisconsin, writes:

> Sadly, my stepfather passed away, fortunately not because of COVID-19, but he was unable to get proper care he needed due to the COVID-19 in hospitals. While in prison they took away in-person visits which makes it difficult to connect with family and friends. It is unsafe to have the population coming into the prison where they could possibly infect us. The prison has set up video visits however, it is not the same as in person visits where we can have that intimate contact with our loved one.

When discussing the death of her stepfather, Rebecca describes how COVID-19 disrupted mourning rituals. By switching to digital visitations, Rebecca raises concerns that a path to reform while incarcerated had been disrupted by COVID-19.

In later weeks, we discussed Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (2010). Referring to earlier references to video visitations, I asked students how their relationship with technology had changed since the start of the pandemic. Shandra, a twenty-something Native American woman who grew up in rural Wisconsin, writes about how Haraway's cyborg aesthetic intersected with her concept of fictive kinship:

> Native women have a close relationship in prison. There is normally a motherly elder who helps out everybody. She is not there to help as much in quarantine. During the pandemic, I relied more heavily on my computer and zoom calls as a kind of escape. I used it to express my stresses and concerns and receive support from my peers.

In her writing, Shandra links settler-colonialism with incarceration and quarantine. Much like Rebecca, Shandra witnesses digital technology creating a support system during the pandemic. Although this support system does not completely replace the support system mobilized by her indigenous community in prison, digital communication provides an escape and an alternative. The pandemic imbues digital technologies with special meaning and allows individuals to transcend forms of kinship that were fractured by quarantine.

While digital technology was important for many, others were able to strengthen the social networks that they had within the prison. Ryan, a thirty-something White male from Milwaukee's suburbs, refers to the idea of fictive kinship to describe social adaptation within the prison:

> There are many roles that are played by individuals in my fictive kinship group in prison. My group is structured around a leader who is in his fifties and has been incarcerated for a decade. There is a funny guy or joker. We also have a smart guy who you go to for help with a problem. We cook meals together, workout, play games, and study together (when not in quarantine). Everybody has something they bring to the group and this new family has helped me cope with the fact that I can't see my real family due to Covid-19.

Other students alluded to a similar type of "closed-circuit kinship," where the process of incarceration creates adaptive and expansive social networks (Da Cunha 2008) that were needed as family visitation was prohibited. Charisma

or intelligence, the sharing of a common hearth, and shared ritual (i.e., games and studying) all played a role in creating social intimacy during a prison pandemic.

Political Economy and the Prison Pandemic

Following our discussions of kinship, I asked students to describe economic exchange during a pandemic in terms of *Ongka's Big Moka* (Nairn 1974), a documentary about non-capitalist exchange, Big Men, and modernity in Papua New Guinea. Daniel, a twenty-something Latino man from Milwaukee's south side, responds:

> The pandemic has caused restrictions to be placed on things like canteen and the property catalogs. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic many items from China were unavailable due to restrictions placed on imports. A moka during the pandemic would be someone giving aid such as toilet paper or face masks, etc. and then expecting a return of their investment in some way.

Like all my students, Daniel used the moka as a metaphor rather than an actual one-to-one model for prison exchange. Similar to the moka, informal prison economies put an emphasis on close networks of exchange (Radford 1945). Prison markets—both those established by the institution (i.e., canteen or property catalog) and between prisoners—fulfill needs that are not met by the institution, such as toilet paper and face masks (Gibson-Light 2018). When referring to China, Daniel suggests that prisoners understand their experience under quarantine in terms of a global commodity chain and not solely the result of a local institution.

In subsequent weeks, we read Marx and Engels's (1967) *Communist Manifesto* and Michael Taussig's (1980) *The Devil and Commodity Fetish*. Relating the idea of political economy to the pandemic, students frequently referred to how the meaning of work and labor was shaped by COVID-19.

Ryan writes:

> Our minimum work release programs have been shut down for a year and many previously held contracts have been lost. Our part- and full-time prison jobs which pay between twelve cents and forty-two cents an hour have remained. It is these jobs that have allowed for us to afford purchasing commissary. As with the free society, I believe we will feel the economic effects and impacts of the pandemic for years to come.

By describing how prisoners lack control over their working lives, Ryan unintentionally invoked scholarship that connects economic productivity, dispossession, and social death (see Patterson 2018). During the pandemic, incarcerated individuals lost one of the few avenues for participating in the market (i.e., a prison job that paid 1.6% of Wisconsin's minimum wage). By losing the ability to work, COVID-19 has further restricted the ability of incarcerated individuals to participate in market activities and gain self-worth.

Many students also mentioned a $1,400 stimulus given by the United States federal government that was meant to offset the pandemic's economic effects. Prisoners were initially excluded from receiving the stimulus, reflecting how incarcerated individuals are rarely seen as full members of the economy and are denied rights afforded to the general population (Caminer 2021). A student named Dwayne, who had worked several jobs within the prison, including in the kitchen and library, relates the stimulus to the idea of class solidarity. "A prisoner in California challenged the IRS's decision to exclude prisoners from receiving the stimulus checks and won, making it possible for prisoners to receive the payments." Dwayne connects the ability to receive the stimulus with a recognition of legal rights. By arguing in favor of a stimulus for prisoners, Dwayne also suggests a sense of class solidarity among prisoners that emerged during the pandemic based around access to material resources and work.

Sensing the Pandemic in Prisons

Official mechanisms for epidemiological analysis were relatively incapable of reflecting how prisoners sensed, felt, smelled, heard, and tasted the pandemic. Sensory perception—or the lack thereof—was nonetheless essential to how prisoners made sense of their social world (Pink 2010). Similarly, student writing often described a loss of senses as both a consequence of infection and a side effect of social isolation during the pandemic.

Rebecca writes, "There is no 'feel' because everyone is social distancing and in some cases there may not be any smell or taste because the virus took those senses away from the people infected." Others echoed Rebecca and described a loss of more culturally defined notions of "taste" with kitchens not fully staffed and meals becoming blander and more monotonous.

Students also echoed Rebecca's description of a loss of smell as the result of COVID-19. Several described a "bleached" environment. The smell of bleach is associated with cleanliness and helps humans separate themselves from microbial life (McCloud, Kershaw, and Nerlich 2020). For many students, the overwhelming smell of cleaning materials reminded students of the virus's threat and the lack of access to other forms of self-care.

Daniel describes an evolution of the senses during and after quarantine and suggests that there was also meaning in a return of the senses:

> When we were quarantined, we were locked in our cells for a couple months. At this point we were prohibited from going outside, dayroom, school, which was a form of sensory deprivation. When you are stuck in a cell for 23 hours a day with minimal human contact for months your senses become shocked when things are reintroduced. When the quarantine was lifted and we were let outside, my senses were overloaded. The first thing I felt was the wind on my face, the sun made me squint my eyes, I heard all the voices chattering. I felt a sense of freedom while in prison as I walked outside and, for a time, grown men acted like playful kids. Slowly the world of tension and situational awareness came back as we gained more freedom throughout the institution.

Daniel describes how the dehumanizing sensory effects of quarantine were only elevated when lockdowns were lifted. An eventual commune with nature was socially and psychologically curative and inspired idealistic comparisons to a childhood that pre-dated a prison pandemic.

COVID and Refusing Carceral Authority

The final section of the course focused on authority, the carceral state, and identity. We read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and developed a vocabulary to critically assess types of everyday authority in prison. Daniel wrote about the normalization of power during quarantine:

> My new discipline is the constant scrutiny and having every mannerism dictated by authority to make sure I'm following COVID-19 guidelines…. I think that Foucault would have seen our treatment as steppingstones from micro-management to macro-management, that if we are not careful, this all may become normalized for the incarcerated populations of the United States.

Daniel hypothesizes about Foucault's reaction to COVID-19 and suspects that pandemic authority will be normalized. He fears that quarantine policies would be used to further dehumanize the incarcerated long after the pandemic.

Building on Foucault's discussion of authority, we finished the course by reading Audra Simpson's "Consent's Revenge" (2016) and discussed how students "refuse" authoritative ways of knowing in their everyday lives. Shandra discussed how she refused both institutional policies and ways of thinking about the pandemic:

> I have "refused" to social distance during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had COVID-19 early on and was asymptomatic. We are forced to wear masks as a rule inside prison during the pandemic but I often "refuse" them as well…. As seen on television, and listening to family and friends, I could discern that people of color didn't really view this pandemic with the same degree of concern and urgency as Whites. We just didn't seem to have "time" for it, or to be worrying over something we just didn't have much control over. I still don't understand why we have to wear a mask—especially in a correctional institution where we are packed in like sardines.

By not wearing a mask and questioning the logic of the epidemiological control, Shandra refuses the carceral and colonial systems that have perpetuated historical traumas in her community. Shandra points specifically to a lack of control in determining self-care. Furthermore, Shandra also suggests that the pandemic authority witnessed by incarcerated people often contradicts what the incarcerated experienced in their day-to-day lives.

A Post-Pandemic Prison Policy

The writing of incarcerated students about the pandemic reveals how anthropology can play a role in mitigating public misunderstandings about public policy (Marabello and Parisi 2020). Ethnographic community-based approaches to pandemic analysis show the type of information that is not easily documented by traditional epidemiological research (Mahoney et al. 2020). Anthropological teaching gives incarcerated people a vocabulary to explain a variety of issues that were not made clear in a broader media narrative, through traditional data collection methods, or in official press releases made by prison officials. Critical pedagogy and collaborative ethnography are also capable of counteracting the disruptive nature of pandemics while humanizing the role of incarcerated students as collaborators and agents of policy analysis.

My example of critical pedagogy in prison also provides a path from classroom critique to policy critique. Through the classroom, educators can explore critical social questions by mobilizing applied pedagogy to create knowledge pertaining to the lived traumas of students. While the results of these collaborative methodologies may not have had wide-ranging and immediate consequences, they reflect the ability of collaborative ethnography to intervene in policymaking. For example, researchers at the WDOC reviewed and responded to my findings and subsequently had direct access to anonymized scholarly critiques of Wisconsin's prison policies.

Given the ad hoc nature of my research design, I recognize my collaborative methodologies could be improved. As a prison educator, the analysis of students' writing brought to light how my access to information is distinct from the information made available to the broader public and prison officials. More expansive and direct forms of member-checking that were not permitted under pandemic quarantine would allow incarcerated students to better validate findings by their collaborators on the outside. By applying this prisoner-centered approach, future policy can avoid a historical perspective that the incarcerated are incubators of a biological and social disease while also centering modes that prisoners best attend to the trauma of "social death." In the second year of the pandemic, prisoners remain captured in a system that will place them in unexpected harm and with limited capacity to tend to their biological and social needs. By building a pedagogical interface around catastrophe and asking students to communicate the problems they face in their everyday lives, we can disrupt the cyclical nature of incarceration and prevent the long-term traumas created by future pandemic outbreaks.

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