

Book Review: Lizzie Seal and Maggie O'Neill, Imaginative Criminology of Spaces Past, Present and Future

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Title: Lizzie Seal and Maggie O'Neill, Imaginative Criminology Of Spaces Past, Present and Future. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019.

Imaginative Criminology of Spaces Past, Present and Future is a reflective and exploratory volume aimed at developing creative and visionary methodologies within criminological inquiry. Pushing beyond traditional methods that 'count' or highlight social phenomena, the authors call "attention to the micrology of lived experience, the forms and ways of telling" through "live methods that open up the potential for how we do criminology imaginatively" (p.3). At first reading, this text is set to be a criminological classic, akin to C.Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*. Profoundly political, Seal and O'Neill guide the reader through spaces of confinement, imprisonment, and trauma to draw attention to how one can imagine the construction, existence, and negotiation of such spaces. Further, they delve into fictionalised spaces, arguing that fiction offers huge scope for imaginative criminology by generating images of social life and opening the potential "of a radical democratic imaginary" (p. 118). For scholars accustomed to traditional qualitative methods of research, this volume will gently challenge you to consider utilising live methods within your work by exploring how subjective histories and presents inform the futures that we imagine.

Seal and O'Neill weave historical narratives of confinement and oppression, the analysis of cultural artefacts, and ethnographic methods together through the book, establishing a holistic methodology to conduct qualitative research. They focus on the oral histories provided in their work to articulate the spaces of confinement they examine. These were analysed in juxtaposition with cultural texts – such as films, biographical writings and memoirs, and novels that depict or describe the spaces they are pursuing – to imaginatively scrutinise their cultural memory. Imagination here is viewed as a methodological skill used to probe cultural and historical subjectivities that researchers themselves may not have experienced.

Structured into eight chapters, the authors make the case for imaginative criminology in their introduction, before turning their attention to historical places of confinement in the second and third chapters, examining Indigenous children in Australia and Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, respectively. For those of us who are not indigenous, the histories of social control surrounding the colonisation of Australia, specifically where children were placed into homes in order to 'civilise' them, can only exist in the imaginations of criminologists as sites of trauma and social harm. Similarly, the case of Magdalene Laundries - a place of confinement for 'deviant' women in post-independence Ireland - allows readers to explore the cultural memory and significance of sites of social control and transgression. The real merit of this work is allowing the reader to engage in the "politics of feeling" (p. 28), by imagining the harms associated with the spaces of confinement outlined.

Seal and O'Neill turn their focus, in Chapter 4, onto the practice of creative writing for the purpose of imaginative criminology, by drawing on two creative writing projects

with males who have offended, from two category B prisons. Creative writing, as a methodological tool, allows participants to engage their personal biographies through fictional and poetic work. The role of memory and imagination is key to exploring and imagining such spaces of imprisonment and the lives it affects. Indeed, the examination of cultural artefacts “can pierce us and facilitate access to the liveable lives of residents made out in the margins of the city and the margins of legality, welfare and poverty” (p. 101).

The authors then move to explore the nature of borders and spaces of violence through ethnographies on the move, by walking with participants in refugee camps (Chapter 5). They go on to support this method using two case-studies of Northern Ireland and Vancouver (Chapter 6), where they take narratives from their participants whilst walking around spaces of personal importance. They argue that walking ethnographies act as a way of making sense of the cultural meaning and memory of the lived experiences and historic narratives of the individuals. For instance, their participants lead the authors to spaces of cultural and personal significance, allowing the Seal and O’Neill to imagine the spaces of violence and transgression. Finally, the authors turn to imagine dystopian futures in young adult fiction, which for criminologists - they argue - is a pedagogical “cultural resource with which to envision the future and to highlight the necessity for change” (p. 132).

This book invites scholars to scrutinise sources such as cultural artefacts which “make this politics of feeling and radical democratic imaginary possible” (p. 35). As a reader, this struck me as an exceptionally political endeavour, of which the authors should be applauded. For example, the cultural artefacts that articulate the pain associated with confinement and social oppression for Indigenous people reveal the complicity of non-Indigenous people in the ongoing struggles they face today. Whilst all analysis of victimisation and oppression is macabre, the scrutiny put forward by the authors is hopeful. I was convinced that by exploring these spaces through imagination, we as scholars can recognise means and ways to actively dismantle the historic legacies of oppression that have been laid down by majority groups. The book’s main contribution to Qualitative Research lies in this ability to offer ways that researchers can simultaneously capture historical, present, and future meaning, which shape our participant’s ongoing realities and experiences. Whilst demonstrating the rich analysis that can be conducted through the examples highlighted, for ease of accessibility I would have appreciated a brief step-by-step guide on how to carry out such creative, experiential, and conceptual methods. Without this guide, those unfamiliar with live qualitative methods may find this a challenging read. However, the analysis presented by Seal and O’Neill - through images, stories, narratives, and creativity - equips the qualitative criminologist with new directions to envision justice and better worlds.