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ENTERING THE GLOBAL FIELD: TALK, TRAVEL AND NARRATIVE PRACTICE IN ECUADORIAN PRISONS

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Abstract

Prisons in Ecuador represent a globalised field. In this fieldwork confessional I outline my place within this field (characterised by global inequalities), and describe the ways in which I gained entry to the community of foreign nationals. In particular, I focus on the construction of being foreign as a specific membership category, as well as the role of narrative and storytelling in bridging international and social divides, fostering a shared sense of community, and the role of visitors as listeners for inmates' stories. This narrative practice made researching drug trafficking possible, however such stories require careful interpretation to avoid misinterpretation.

Keywords

Narrative; fieldwork; methodology; prisons; globalisation.

Introduction

Before I was an ethnographer, I was a backpacker. In 2002, I spent two months in Ecuador learning Spanish and 'travelling', like many other middle-class, white British kids. During a month long stay in Quito, I heard I could visit Brits imprisoned for drug trafficking. With little deliberation, I noted down the instructions and the following Wednesday set off for the men's prison with my passport, the name of the inmate I would visit, and a carrier bag of cigarettes, chocolate, and toilet paper (these being the things I thought a prisoner from home might like).

Garcia Moreno prison is downtown, high up on the side of the valley about ten blocks from the presidential palace. The San Roque neighbourhood is poor and rarely visited by most Quiteños, let alone tourists. On a clear day, the views across the city are spectacular; small comfort for the long queue of visitors lined up outside under the baking midday sun. I had never visited a prison before, but was soon ushered through bag and body searches, jostling alongside prisoners' friends and family members, most carrying packages (one family even carried a mattress). Guards painstakingly unpacked suitcases full of clothes and stabbed birthday cakes and tubs of food for contraband. Finally, near the main door, we handed over our identification and the name of the prisoner we were visiting was carefully entered, by hand, into a hefty ledger. Finally, our credentials checked (we were stamped on our forearms for every search), we were finally ushered inside.

Built in 1875, Garcia Moreno prison is star shaped, like London's Pentonville. The walls are thick stone with small windows: its corridors dark and cold in contrast with the equatorial sun. We passed the kitchen where inmates stirred cauldrons of slop over massive fires, and quickly arrived in the centre of the 'star'. Here, visitors enter the prison. There is no visit room. A short, scruffily dressed man found me in the crowd and asked who I wanted to visit: we quickly established that the man I planned to see had left and instead he took me to *El Britanico*, the British man. He led me up two flights of stairs, dirty with stagnant water and rubbish and along the second floor balcony to the end, banging noisily on a heavy cell door, which was locked from the inside. A small metal grate slide to the side, and two eyes frowned. 'I've come to visit', I said, holding up my bag of gifts. A moment or two later, the door clanked open. 'I'm Paul', he said.¹

This article offers a 'confessional' about how I came to undertake fieldwork with drug traffickers imprisoned in Ecuador with the aim of 'explicitly demystifying fieldwork... by showing how the technique is practiced in the field' (Van Maanen, 2011:73). Fieldwork for my PhD was begun during my undergraduate degree, finally published some years later (Fleetwood 2014). As the above account shows, getting into prison was remarkably straightforward. In fact fieldwork for my undergraduate dissertation was undertaken during visit days. I eventually sought formal research access, but only many years after

¹ Of course, all names have been changed to protect respondents. Identifying details have also been removed.

access had been established informally.² Although methodological issues around formally gaining access to criminal justice institutions are important, this article is instead concerned with the sociological and cultural dynamics that enabled me to enter prisons in Ecuador as an outsider. This fieldwork, researching international drug trafficking, offers some insights into entering a global field, by examining the ways in which new categories of in/out are constituted. Drawing on field notes, I consider how entry was gained, especially storytelling as a central aspect of the culture of drug traffickers in prison and the backpackers (like me) who visited them. My account is prefaced by a review of how ethnographers have successfully gained entry into global fields that are criminal or deviant. This article is mainly concerned with how I gained entry into the men's prison. Although my fieldwork spanned three prisons in the end, this was the first site and so represented my initial entry.

Entering global research fields

The influence of globalisation on crime and criminal justice institution is firmly established (Aas, 2013; Bowling & Sheptycki, 2011; Findlay, 1999). Yet, criminologists tend to undertake research at 'home', or to undertake projects bounded by the nation state. In contrast, sociologists such as Burawoy call for ethnography that engages with, and seeks to understand processes of globalisation (2000). Doing so means rethinking fieldwork, 'combining dwelling and travelling' to engage with fields that stretch across the globe (2000:4; see also Büscher & Urry 2009; Letherby, 2010). Rather than engaging with one place (as with traditional ethnography), Burawoy argues for fieldwork that is multi-sited, but also grounded in local history (2000), thus able to grasp the macro sociological processes that shape daily life. Rather than studying globalisation itself, Sassen offers two ways of thinking about global/globalised sites. The first is the trans-nationalised local, in other words local practices that now have a transnational or global dimension (2007). The second is the globalised sub-national (the globalised local): spaces, places and social practices profoundly re-shaped by processes of globalisation (ibid).

Such global fields arguably present particular challenges to establishing entry, yet, many of the same issues are still in play. Ethnographic researchers' tales of 'getting in' are a recognisable sub-genre of the fieldwork confessional, and advice for the novice ethnographer abounds (Brewer, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For ethnographers of crime and deviance, prior connections count for a great deal, ensuring the researcher can be trusted, or at least that he/she is not police (see for example Pearson 1993; Hobbs

² I acknowledge the Programa de Estudios de la Ciudad, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) sede Quito, Ecuador for hosting me and negotiating research access during fieldwork in 2006. I acknowledge the Dirección Nacional de Rehabilitación Social, Ecuador for formally granting me access as a researcher. In 2014, García Moreno prison (and the other prisons in which I undertook fieldwork) closed for good, replaced by US style high security jails in which visitors spend limited time with family in a public visit room. The porosity of Ecuadorian prisons (before 2014) allowed families to meet regularly, talk at length, eat and even sleep together. It also enabled me to adventure into prison as a backpacker tourist, bring my friends and eventually undertake fieldwork (before I was granted official access). The reader may rightly conclude that I abused this privilege for my own purposes. The closure of the jail (and de facto end of backpacker prison visiting) allows me to write frankly about prison tourism. I hope this confessional account does not bring embarrassment to those (past or present) involved in running prisons in Ecuador.

1993, 2001). On the other hand, ethnographers without personal connections must typically negotiate social distance and power imbalances as a prerequisite to building trust and rapport (see for example Goffman, 2015:215). An array of relationships to the field have been typologised, from complete participant (i.e. complete member) to complete observer (Gold, 1958). Adler and Adler propose several membership roles that ethnographers can adopt (1987). What kinds of roles can global ethnographers adopt? How do ethnographers gain entry into global fields? In a globalised world, do personal connections matter?

Entering transnational fields is especially challenging for ethnographers interested in crime and deviance. Transnational crime, by its nature, happens in many places at once, stretching across the globe. An excellent example of multi-sited ethnography is Schepers-Hughes' ethnography of organ trafficking (2004). As well as contacting and interviewing those who had donated or received organs, she also posed as an organ-buyer as a way of gaining entry to medical establishments (ibid). This methodology reflects the kinds of temporary social interactions that characterise the international organ trade, as well as Schepers-Hughes' status as a US citizen, allowing her to adopt a membership role, albeit temporarily. Similarly, Brotherton and Barrios' transnational ethnography of Dominican deportees (2011) draws on fieldwork undertaken in New York and the Dominican Republic. They traced Dominican deportees' experiences of social exclusion through deportation (and in some cases their illegal return to the USA), producing rich insights into how social exclusion (via the criminal justice system) operates transnationally. Both researchers had a degree of 'insider' status owing to personal biography: Barrios migrated to the USA from Puerto Rico as a child and had 'insider' contacts in the Dominican community in New York. Brotherton (also an immigrant to the USA from the UK) also undertook ethnographic research of the legal processes that facilitate deportation while acting as an expert witness (2011: 27).

Ethnographers of crime and deviance have more commonly researched globalisation at the level of the sub-national (i.e. the globalised local). Nonetheless, the distinction between local and transnational may not be so clear-cut. Hobbs' decades-long ethnography began as a distinctly local study of criminal sub-cultures in London's east end (1995). Nonetheless, his ethnographic fieldwork elucidates the ways in which local and transnational crime is connected, noting that transnational crime is 'local at all points' (1998: 419). Likewise, ethnographic research on international drug trafficking has made ample use of local 'hubs' in the transnational drug trade, for example Patti and Peter Adler's classic ethnographic of the international cocaine trade (1993). Full membership roles were not appropriate, and so they became peripheral members. They note that entry was gained via persistence, and drawing on aspects of shared values and identity. Damian Zaitch's ethnography of Colombian traffickers in the Netherlands drew on his biography as an Argentinian. He notes: 'Neither Dutch, nor Colombian myself, I often felt fortunate to be in the intermediate position of a "quasi-native" researcher' (2002:13). Despite being 'quasi-native', he reports engaging in the kinds of activities typical of ethnographic field researchers: 'They asked me all sorts of favours and things: juridical advice, translation of documents, housing, money, books, email and mail addresses to receive post, or jobs. I was also expected to learn salsa and to drink and smoke with them. I did most of these things and some more.' (2002:15).

Both Adler and Zaitch undertook ethnographic fieldwork 'at home'. Researching globalised sites abroad presents particular issues for gaining access due to global social inequalities. Hoefinger undertook fieldwork on the bar girl scene in Cambodia (local women who undertake transnational sex - sometimes - with foreign men) (2013). She carefully describes the ways in which she and her respondents' similar ages and common participation in a shared, globalised culture, enabled rapport, although not as equals:

'The powerful influence of my hegemonic, western culture and [respondents'] desire to emulate certain characteristics of it (the liberalness, the consumptiveness, the spending power, the fashion styles, the dance styles) speaks to the inherent (neo-) colonial nature of structural hierarchies that still dominate the foreign-local social landscape of Cambodia and in most countries of the global south... We were from the same generation and therefore we shared not only similar mutual interests in style of music, for example, but also life goals that crossed boundaries of class and race.' (2013:55).

Ethnographic research is arguably well placed for engaging with global fields of crime and justice. What follows is my account of gaining entry into prisons in Ecuador, considering how biography and globalised hierarchies can be problems as well as resources for gaining entry.

A globalised field: hierarchies of mobility in prison in Ecuador
Travel is an 'integral part of a 'new world order of mobility' (Richards & Wilson, 2004:3). Along with new technologies, it has had a profound effect on contemporary life and global social relations. In 2005, 37 per cent of prisoners in Quito were foreign nationals, mostly charged with drug offences (Gallardo & Nuñez, 2006: 9, 27).³ They came from all over South America, but especially Colombia. 12% were from outside South America (ibid), (South Africa, Thailand, North America and all corners of Europe) reflecting the globalised nature of the flow of cocaine. Globalisation has not happened everywhere, nor has it happened evenly (Ray, 2006; de Sousa Santos, 2006). Bauman argues that globalisation produces new hierarchies of mobility, describing two paradigmatic types: the 'tourist' and the 'vagabond', both consequences of postmodern consumer society (1998). While tourists (the globally mobile) travel for adventure, to consume experiences, vagabonds are compelled to travel: for work, for survival, because they have no other choice (ibid). The question of structure and agency in drug trafficking is complex (Fleetwood, 2014), nonetheless it is true that few traffickers travel due to pure desire to see and experience the world. Many, but not all, could be considered vagabonds: those compelled to travel (Bauman, 1998).

In contrast to all this global mobility, prisons are 'factories of immobility' (Bauman, 1998); places for managing the 'waste' of postmodern consumer capitalism. Prisons in Ecuador were exactly such. Prisons housed many local, Ecuadorian men known as *polillas* (moths).

³ The national average was 9.3 per cent (Gallardo & Nuñez, 2006:9). Prisons in Quito held a much higher average due to the proximity of the international airport.

Many were vagrants prior to their incarceration and continued to be so on the inside, making a bare living, often through begging (Nuñez, 2006). Recall the man who escorted me to Paul's cell: he spent visit days running errands for 25c a time. Prisoners received little more than a place to sleep (not a mattress, linen or an actual bed) and a daily ration of the food from the communal kitchen (but not a bowl to put it in, or a spoon to eat with). With long delays in sentencing and little prospect of education or training, Ecuadorian prisons are truly immobilising.

The *polillas'* bare existence seems untouched by globalisation. Poor, ethnic minority men and women have been imprisoned for drunkenness, theft and other minor offences in Garcia Moreno prison during most of its 139-year history (Herrera 2014).⁴ Yet, their contemporary incarceration - like foreign national drug traffickers - must be understood through the lens of geopolitics. In the 2000s prisons in Ecuador were profoundly impacted by the so-called 'war on drugs' led by the USA in the region. For example, in 2005 the Ecuadorian government signed a bilateral agreement with the USA agreeing to meet targets of a 10% increase in the capture of drugs, and a 12% increase in the capture of so-called narco-traffickers (Pontón & Torres, 2007). Since Ecuadorian drug laws did not differentiate between users, dealers and traffickers, nor between drugs, such policies encouraged a 'logic of quantification': vast numbers of poor people were arrested and imprisoned, mainly mules, dealers and local men and women possessing very small quantities of drugs (Edwards, 2003). During the 2000s, Garcia Moreno prison operated at near double capacity. Ethnographic research documents daily life in prisons pushed to the brink by overcrowding and lack of funding (Nuñez, 2006; Pontón & Torres, 2007; Pontón, 2008).⁵

In contrast to inmate-vagabonds, I was a tourist, one of those who 'become wanderers and put the bitter sweet dreams of homesickness above the comforts of home - because they want to... or because they have been seduced by the true or imaginary pleasures of a sensation-gatherers life' (Bauman, 1998:92). My entrance to prisons in Ecuador reflects privilege on a global scale. Even as a student, international travel was within easy reach. Part of this is historical good fortune. In the early 2000s I was in my early 20s in Blair's Britain and being white and middle class, I could anticipate employment, and in the meantime engage in a degree of youthful hedonism and adventure on the back of my student loan. International travel was cheap and commonplace. Backpacking had moved from the realm of the 'hippy drop out' to the mainstream (Reilly, 2006). Travel was an enticing leisure activity with the potential to gain experiential knowledge of the world, to become more open minded, independent, in short, more 'worldly'. These values are summed up by sociological and anthropological work on backpacker subculture (Binder et al., 2004; Welk, 2004).

My formal entry into my field site is also paved by privilege in terms of class and ethnicity. Indeed, it is a long held critique that many ethnographers of deviance research 'down' (Hobbs, 2001). Coming from an 'old' university in the global north brought credibility

⁴ Garcia Moreno closed for good in 2014.

⁵ See also the documentary 'El Comité' (Herrera, 2005).

helping me negotiate an honorary position at a local university⁶ and research access to prison. Being a pale, blue-eyed global elite was also advantageous in fieldwork. Guards tended to assume I was a member of the embassy, or a missionary, both roles reflecting long-standing international involvement in Ecuador. Nonetheless, I recorded a steady stream of phone cards, pens, chocolate, cigarettes and biscuits taken by guards, either because they were 'forbidden' or following polite requests.⁷ My age and gender didn't mark me out as a distinguished professorial type. A female prison guard once accused me of being a prostitute after she saw me hug one of my respondents (and then "confiscated" my research pass!).⁸ Gender, class, sexuality and generation were important, but - as will be seen - my status as a European was paramount.

Negotiating global hierarchies: identity, community and storytelling

Bauman notes synergies between 'vagabonds' and 'tourists' claiming the vagabond is the tourist's most ardent admirer' (1998: 94). This synergy, as alter egos and admirers, facilitated entry into the field in unexpected ways, enabling me to establish the 'mutuality' necessary for ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 72). Paul and Graham were my first respondents, and gatekeepers who introduced me to fellow foreigners in the men's and women's prisons. They often commented that they would never have spoken to me on the outside, partly since, as drug traffickers, they would not have spoken to a nosy outsider (Hobbs, 2001), but also because our paths would simply never have crossed. Underpinning this statement was a keen awareness of social distance and divisions that would have played out at 'home'. Early on in fieldwork, I noted:

'They are an extraordinary group of people in my life and perhaps me in theirs. Not in the sense that I am an extraordinary person, but because we are out of the ordinary to each other.' (Fieldnote, November 2005).

Paul's background is firmly working class; he left school early to work. After a stint in the army, he moved from job to job. His first visits to Latin America were to meet his wife's family. While in prison, he drew, painted, carved, and his tattoos graced many bodies in Garcia Moreno. We are a generation and a class apart. We also hung out with Graham, a kid my age (mid-20s) from a North American city I knew partly through ethnography and film. Graham told me about selling drugs in school, working as a masseur in a health club, getting married in his teens and receiving packages of drugs in the mail. Our lives could not have been less alike: I worked in a haberdasher, and had played cello in the local orchestra. Although I had once been mistakenly accused of selling cannabis in school, vast social difference existed between us. But, in prison being Anglophone global northerners offered us a shared identity, which we expressed through the kinds of things we talked about, and how we 'hung out' together.

We all liked martial arts films and Reggaeton music; arguably part of globalised culture (like Hoefinger, 2013). Oftentimes we hung out in Paul's cell drinking tea and eating

⁶ See footnote 2.

⁷ I should state explicitly that I was never asked for, nor did I ever pay a bribe to enter prison.

⁸ Fortunately I quickly applied for a replacement which was quickly granted.

biscuits, listening to the radio, and playing cards. At least one pleasant Saturday afternoon was spent chopping vegetables with the one blunt knife available to make a chilli. In passing time together, we sought to create a common sense of 'home' (even though none truly existed). Being 'foreigners' offered us a shared sense of identity: one that comes into being in the context of Garcia Moreno prison as a globalised field.

Constructing community: foreign nationals in prison

As a 'foreigner', I was accorded entry into the small group of international drug traffickers in prison, comprised mainly of English speakers from North America and Europe, as well as some honorary members from Latin America (especially those who had lived in the Anglophone north).⁹ Although there were many kinds of foreigners in prison (from all over Latin America, West Africa, the Middle East and even China), this group set themselves apart, not only through language, but as would be 'tourists', and consumers within the prison.

Ecuadorian ethnographer Nuñez notes that the introduction of relatively well-educated, well-off foreigners had a profound effect on the prison through their introduction of capital and organisation (2006). Pavilion C was mainly populated by drug traffickers and housed most of the international drug traffickers, or at least those who could afford it. Each pavilion charged inmates an entrance fee as well as regular taxes that funded all maintenance of the wing as well as bribes for guards. Pavilion C was a world apart from the other wings; noticeably cleaner and better decorated. The introduction of foreigners resulted in a thriving internal economy (funded largely by the drug trade) (Nuñez 2006). In addition to the marketization of pavilions and cells, individual cells also ran as 'corner shops'. In the hallways, inmates paid rent on small food and drink stalls. A Russian owned kiosk functioned as the de facto headquarters of Europeans, selling lunches, including a delicious borscht, as well as tea and coffee to the foreigners who hung out there all day:

'Ryan and I... went and sat in the patio of C, very posh, chairs 'n tables and umbrellas too....We sat at a table with Michael [Canada] and the 'old boy' [UK] came by... Also the young Romanian guy Bee, Leonardo [Italy] (who is still trying to get me to sell footage of prison fights on the internet. I also met Johan, a German with several piercings on his face. Graham dropped in and out too. Santiago [Colombia] also dropped by to see what's up. Noting the variety of nationalities represented, he declared it to be a criminal United Nations!' (Fieldnote, October 2005).

Some foreign nationals worked within the prison. Graham spoke Spanish (and was voted by his pavilion to work in the prison administration), but many did not making it hard to find work, aside from perhaps teaching English. Some received regular financial support from family; others continued to traffic drugs. Those who could afford it were consumers within the marketised context of the prison: would-be tourists who distinguished themselves from vagabonds. As well as frequenting food kiosks (they rarely ate the slop

⁹ The men's and women's prisons each housed groups of foreign nationals which were quite well connected. Wives and girlfriends in the women's prison could apply to visit their partners every Thursday. Many had also met while detained, or were connected through criminal cases.

provided by the prison), they bought a variety of goods and services: employing Ecuadorians to cook, do their laundry and even clean their cells. Foreigners were also targets for extortion within the prison, and many fell on hard times during their stay in prison: initial sympathy and donations from family members often petered out during long sentences.

Membership was automatically accorded on the basis of nationality. Whenever a new inmate arrived, inmates collaborated to connect them into existing networks. For example, Santiago was from Medellín in Colombia and owned a corner shop. Hearing that a fellow *paisano* had arrived, he immediately sent out a package of bread and cigarettes for him. Similarly, whenever a European arrived, fellow Europeans would try to find them a decent cell, and try to warn them about how to avoid becoming a victim of extortion. Our group of foreigners overlapped with other alliances, sometimes according to race/ethnicity, and at other times for business (including drug trafficking).

Becoming a member

As a foreign national who regularly visited, I was initially a peripheral member of the group, but became an active member (Adler & Adler, 1987). My role - as most regular visitor - brought obligations relating to the challenges faced by inmates (Adler and Adler 1987: 34). I was frequently called on to collect official paperwork or prescriptions, to contact home or the embassy or undertake any other 'emergency' duties that needed an outside contact. Being a visitor to both men's and women's prisons meant that I acted as a conduit between communities of foreigners in both prisons, often delivering messages, letters and gifts.

In 2002 (before I started fieldwork), I brought a fellow backpacker and Ecuadorian, Diego, to Garcia Moreno prison. Diego and Graham hit it off right away - both having lived in the USA and being of the same generation.¹⁰ In 2005, when I returned for PhD fieldwork, Diego was back in Quito and still visiting Paul and Graham. Between August and December 2005, I spent every weekend in prison, and some Wednesday afternoons too. I rarely visited alone, often visiting with Diego and we also brought flatmates and friends along. To be clear, visits were strongly encouraged by most foreigners in prison. Although having a 'once off' visit might have made them vulnerable to voyeurism (and even exploitation), visits were valued as an important contact with the outside world. The stark reality was that many would otherwise have received no visits at all.

I had little difficulty persuading fellow backpackers to join me for a visit to prison. Prison visiting closely reflects the typical backpacker values - including independent adventure, travel, experience, open-mindedness, meeting other people, and a commitment to counter-culture (Bradt, 1995, in Welk, 2004:80; Matthews & Matthews, 2012). Both imprisoned traffickers and backpackers are fluid, transient, and relatively un-institutionalised groups (Welk, 2004). Both groups can be understood as either literal, or would be, tourists (according to Bauman, 1998). This shared sense of identity as part of a community of foreigners) as well as a shared values were reflected in the ways that

¹⁰ In later years, Diego would help Graham gain parole by giving him a work placement. Graham learned to cook professionally - a career he still pursues.

backpackers and inmates passed the time together. On an especially busy day, around 8 of us were crammed into Paul's cell:

'Paul's cell was incredibly packed and noisy. People were playing cards and smoking, chatting and passing coconut around, and *gaseosa* and cups of coffee and biscuits. It quickly got smelly and smoky and sweaty...' (Fieldnote)

We crammed in, jostling for space and place in the card game, the air thick with smoke. Somebody rolled a joint and passed it around, and another cut lines of cocaine. Diego tried to translate for poor Chad (whose Spanish was developmental) over blaring reggaeton music. The scene hardly felt like prison, which was probably why inmates valued them so much.

Through long-term presence in prison, I moved from being a peripheral group member, to taking an active role in the community (Adler & Adler, 1987), especially in my role in connecting men and women to each other (as conduit) and in actively expanding the community by bringing in visitors. Although the presence of most of the visitors I brought in with me was temporary this fit with backpacker styles of interaction, typified by short, intense meetings. The following section considers my role in the foreign national community, especially in relation to storytelling.

Storytelling

Later that year, Paul's radio was taken over by cockroaches, which changed the station at random. One found its way into Paul's ear in a terrifying incident quickly solved by another inmate pouring warm oil in his ear. Paul is an excellent storyteller, who turned the cockroach incident into a gory story about the brutality of life in Garcia Moreno, told sometimes for fellow inmates but more often for visitors. Criminologists have long noted the importance of talk and narrative in prison (Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Copes et al., 2013; Crewe, 2005; Ugelvik, 2015). Storytelling was especially important in prisons in Ecuador as a globalised field. Inmates told stories amongst themselves to get to know each other, establish their place in the prison hierarchy, explore future drug trafficking collaboration, to make sense of imprisonment, as well as for entertainment. Visitors offered an arena for a different array of stories. Storytelling is also a key part of backpacker culture: sociologists also note that backpackers are a 'garrulous folk', noting the importance of adventure for telling stories, and vice versa (Elsrud, 2001; Noy, 2004; Matthews & Matthews, 2012).

Common storytelling ground: intoxication and travel

Storytelling could bridge national divides and differences between foreign nationals in prison, and foreign visitors, especially through stories about common culture, interests and experiences. As fellow travellers, a common topic was places visited - not only in Ecuador, but the whole of Latin America. Especially fun was to work out where paths might have crossed, or even to discover friends in common. Stories say something about the speakers' identity; stories about travel positioned the speaker as someone who was adventurous, and - sometimes, worldly-wise. Stories about tattoos played a similar role; both inmates and backpackers had them and they were often revealed and admired. All recorded important life experiences, both serious and frivolous. They also told of the

narrator's life before prison: a portable record of experience and statement of identity. Backpackers and prisoners are a globally transient population; where accent and dress might mark out our class and culture, here tattoos represented a mobile marker of identity.

Stories about drug taking and intoxication were also common. This is a common kind of narrative, especially told by young people (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013; Sandberg & Tutenges, 2015). Of course I have my own intoxication story (everyone does!), and participated in the exchange. Some stories of intoxication were highly polished, often hilarious, and there was an element of competition over who could tell the most outrageous one. Intoxication stories especially communicated shared values of living for the moment, hedonism and an appetite for adventure, as well as drug knowledge and know-how. Telling these kinds of stories was a way for visitors to demonstrate street-smartness and common ground, as a way of bridging social divides. Everyone was invested in presenting themselves as 'cool': backpackers often wanted to narratively distinguish themselves from 'straight' society, and prisoners as ordinary deviants (more below). Finally, as Tutenges and Sandberg note, telling intoxication stories is also a key part of getting intoxicated (2013). Although some backpackers came into jail with the explicit intention of buying and taking drugs, not all did. Arguably, the opportunity to take drugs in prison was as exciting as the story that could be later told about having done so!

Traffickers' stories: Getting rich

Inmates' stories about travelling were often about smuggling drugs. Often inmates played up to visitors' expectations about meeting a 'real' trafficker, like those made famous in Rusty Young's book *Marching Powder* (Young & McFadden, 2003), or in trafficker biographies such as *Mr Nice* (Marks, 1997) and *Snowblind* (Sabaag, 1997). There was a common saying in Garcia Moreno prison: trafficking drugs meant either *getting rich, getting killed or going to jail*. Some men had tales of getting rich and living the high life, selling to pop stars as well as near misses and narrow escapes. Trafficking narratives were sometimes realistic, but sometimes fantastic. Juan told of how he married the local cartel leader's daughter after they ran away together into the desert when they were just 16, only to be rescued by her fathers' henchmen. Needless to say, I loved being entertained by these stories, and no doubt respondents especially enjoyed telling them to a wide-eyed girl. Indeed, my presence was clearly an excuse to tell stories and show off:

'Whilst hanging out in Santiago's room [which was also a working corner shop] his friend who owns the burger stall came by and chatted. He'd been collecting debts and had a grand [a thousand dollars] in his pocket which he took out and fanned himself with [the rest of us rolled around laughing]. He also showed me his bullet holes, even where a bullet was still in...'
(Fieldnote)

Stories about being a 'real' trafficker also had to be balanced against the danger of being seen as a real/dangerous criminal. Researchers elsewhere report on hierarchies of crime in prison (most recently Ugelvik, 2015). As Paul often put it: 'we're all nice people in here, we're just criminals'. Talking about dangerous others was a way to narratively present oneself as one of the good (bad) guys:

'There was also a story told about the Chinese assassin who used to share with Lucho who was nicknamed Jet Li. He was rumoured to be in jail for a series of assassinations, including an entire family.' (Fieldnote)

Thus, stories about being a successful trafficker were a way to present oneself as street smart and authentic, whilst also avoiding the stigma associated with more apparently 'serious' forms of offending.

Going to jail: stories about bad luck and hard times

As well as stories about 'getting rich', stories were also told about 'going to jail'. Most men had a story explaining their arrest, and these were told regularly to backpackers (indeed I heard the same narratives retold regularly). Reflecting the close connections between masculinity about crime, such stories tended to neutralise the arrest, rather than the offending behaviour.¹¹ Often pure bad luck was to blame. Juan blamed his arrest on the eruption of a volcano: since his flight was delayed, new airport staff came on shift, rather than those he had bribed to turn a blind eye to his bag. Bad luck stories made clear that the teller was not a bad trafficker, but rather a good trafficker who had some bad luck. Other such stories included incompetence of their collaborators, or even being double-crossed. More rarely, men told stories about hard times:

'Primo showed us photos of some amazing river shrimp and chatted extensively about how much they are sold for, how much they would sell for in the US, and here in Quito, exportation costs and profit margins. He said, I'm not really a trafficker; this is my business.' (Fieldnote)

Trafficking was a way to support Primo's legal business when it was failing. Unfortunately he had ended up in prison (rather than getting rich), but hoped to make international contacts that might enable him to send his shrimp to Europe for a better price.

Surviving prison

Like Paul's gory story about the cockroach in his ear, stories about hard times in prison were sometimes told to visitors. In part, this was a response to backpackers' expectations about visiting one of the 'most dangerous prisons' and hearing about it first-hand. Inmates' stories included light-hearted and even dark humour (recall Paul's cockroach story). Paul's repertoire of stories for visitors included showing them a photograph of himself many kilos heavier before his arrest. As well as showing off his trafficking aptitude (he explained that customs inspectors and air hostesses would never see the drugs strapped to his body, knowing it rude to stare), the same photo also illustrated the brutality of the prison regime: years of food poisoning had reduced him to a fraction of his former weight.

Stories were also told about violence in prison. During a three month long strike in 2005 no guards were present in prison. A story about the violent murder of an inmate was re-told many times:

¹¹ Similarly, Topalli reports that non-arrested drug dealers, car-jackers and robbers narratively seek to neutralize being good, rather than being bad (2005).

'They [Paul, Graham, Juan and Paco] told us one tale about a guy who had accepted a contract on a guy's life in return for a matchbox full of crack. The guy (who was supposed to be murdered)'s friends found out, [and planned a counter attack. They] cornered [the would-be assassin] in his cell, broke in the window and set fire to his cell and threw in a canister of CS gas. He was forced out and then 15 of them stabbed him to death. Some guy went to carry out his body and he groaned so was 'properly finished off' after all that. According to Graham he was cut up into pieces, boiled and put down the drain. According to Paul they found his genitals in the rubbish bin.' (Fieldnote)

Re-telling the story was perhaps a way of warding off a similar fate: being able to explain such brutality was a way to make sense of it, and to reassure oneself it could be avoided. Violence stories also demonstrated the toughness of the storytellers to survive such a place. This was especially so for backpacker audiences, and especially women:

'Pam [Diego's friend, a college student from north America] asked how safe [the prison] was for women [visitors]. Paul's reply was, more or less, "God forbid anyone should so much as scratch you to steal your earrings. You'd get your stuff back *before* you left the prison and someone would end up in hospital, or perhaps the morgue..." after reading this back to him [I recorded it in my notebook], he added, 'Possibly. We don't know how deep the spike would go in.' He then got out his 4" sharpened spike and his sharpened spoon and demonstrated how he would use them (I was sitting opposite him and found it kind of intimidating).' (Fieldnote)

Stories about violence could rarely incorporate victimisation. One inmate reported being tortured into making a confession, including having an electric current passed through his genitals. This story was rarely told in front of other inmates, however Diego reported having been shown the scars. As a visitor, he was an important listener (and believer) of this particular story. In the men's prison few openly admitted to vulnerability (either in lives before imprisonment, or their current situation). Although talking about drug trafficking was extremely common in the men's prison, being seen to talk too much, in the wrong way, or to the wrong person could result in being labelled as having a *boca floja* (loose tongue), with the potential for being seen as 'fake', or even for fatal retributions.

Thus, visitors also opened up the possibility of telling different kinds of stories, especially those which could not be voiced in the day-to-day life. Backpackers were eager listeners and consumers of these tales. They were considerably more credulous than other inmates might have been; this was not always a bad thing. Although these stories sometimes elicited gifts from visitors, the main purpose in telling them seemed to be listened to, rather than helped (after all, what help could backpacker visitors really offer?). To tell one's story to a visitor was also to have existed, to leave some trace on the world. Some foreign nationals received no visits from home during long sentences of six to 12 years. One foreign national inmate explained: 'you've got to be visited; you've got to be heard'. Isolation could be overwhelming; inmates often likened it to being buried alive.

Discussion

The process of getting in reveals much about the nature of the field site and its relationship to outsiders (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Above, I have outlined the ways that prisons in Ecuador were shaped by global geopolitics (the war on drugs in particular) and the ways that social hierarchies in prison reflected global social inequalities. As a global northerner and literally as a 'tourist', visiting prison reflected travel as a privilege that contrasted sharply with those stuck there, such as the *polillas*. As a foreign national, I was quickly accorded a peripheral membership role, which over time developed into an active membership role (Adler & Adler, 1987), at least in relation to foreign national prisoner community (although not actual drug trafficking - to be clear). Whereas class and gender might have set me apart in other contexts, here being a western, Anglophone foreigner came into being as a category of membership.

Storytelling was a common social practice shared by both backpackers and prisoners who comprised a community of foreign nationals in prison in Ecuador. This community was made in/through storytelling practices, including storytelling about travel, tattoos and intoxication. Having visitors opened up space for inmates to tell stories about themselves, and drug trafficking that could not have been otherwise told- these included stories about getting rich and living the fast life as drug traffickers, but also about hard times in trafficking and in prison, including stories about violence. Visitors, myself included, played an important role as listeners (often quite credulous ones!).

Unlike other backpacker foreign visitors whose presence was usually temporary, I played a role in extending the community, and, through extended presence, I became part of the mythology of prison life. I was often around when things happened, and so was able to participate in the shared telling, and re-telling of events. One day, an inmate was assassinated shortly after I arrived. As I climbed the stairs I met Graham, stopping him for a cigarette and chat. The assassin had been right behind me on the stairs. Graham had been on his way to visit the murdered man and later attributed me with saving his life by delaying him. This was the most dramatic instance of becoming part of the mythology of prison life. I was often (falsely) attributed with having started backpacker prison tourism. I first visited as a backpacker in 2002, and so the practice was well established by then (although visits were probably less frequent). Nonetheless, I updated information already available and did bring in visits, so perhaps there is some truth in the myth.

I was also required to tell stories about myself *as researcher*, and as someone who would ultimately tell respondents' stories. Respondents wanted to know who I was, what kind of stories I would tell about them, and what was in it for me. Of course, my responses were all, inevitably, narrative in nature. Storytelling was also a useful way to establish myself as someone distinct from other visitors. Where some visitors tried to prove their street cred by showing off their drug knowledge, displaying my ignorance was a way to present myself as a researcher (rather than pleasure-seeker).

All of this storytelling, or 'narrative practice' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998), made researching drug trafficking possible. Nonetheless, these narrative practices in prison

shaped the data in important ways: structuring what could, and could not be said. These were not ephemera, but central to interpretation and analysis. To quote C. Wright Mills:

'The language of situations as given must be considered a valuable portion of the data to be interpreted and related to their conditions. To simplify these vocabularies of motive into a socially abstracted terminology is to destroy the legitimate use of motive in the explanation of social actions.'
(Wright Mills, 1940: 913).

Ethnographic fieldwork is uniquely placed to be able to appreciate the narrative practices that shape the field (and thus data) so profoundly. Gubrium and Holstein refer to this as narrative ethnography (2008). Narrative ethnography brings into focus the role of storytelling in social life (drawing on ethnomethodology), and is ideally placed to understand the 'language' of situations. In this context especially, drawing on interview data alone would have ignored the particular narrative forms common in prison, and to risk misinterpreting the subsequent interview data produced. Ethnographic presence in prison revealed the importance of storytelling as a form of social action in this context (Sandberg, 2010), and even the role of stories in motivating actions (Presser, 2009).

For backpackers, visiting prison was a way to produce adventure narratives (Noy, 2004). Many accounts can be found in many of the blogs online about prison visiting (Fleetwood & Turner, 2017). Their online stories about prison visiting describe daring, transformation and risk-taking. Paul (and others) were aware of this - they played up to stereotypes, telling stories about the prison and themselves. The stories told by prisoners to each other had an extremely important role in prison life, including securing reputations, including a reputation for violence and skill at drug trafficking. Lastly, the account presented here is a particular genre of research story: a fieldwork 'confessional' (Van Maanen, 2011). Like inmates, and prison visitors, my venture into prison was undertaken with the aim of writing about it afterwards. One could ask to what extent my behaviour as a fieldworker was motivated and sustained by the many fieldwork confessionals I read with such enthusiasm. That, however, is a question for another day.

Conclusion

Tales of entering the field abound in ethnographic research. Here, I have offered a discussion of my entry into a globalised field, and how I 'carved out' a role for myself as fellow foreigner, listener and storyteller. Here, listening to, and recording stories were not merely about data collection, but were integral for my entry into the field. Prisons in Ecuador were marked by global hierarchies of mobility, in which storytelling was a way for foreign nationals to construct themselves as a distinct community in prison (of which I was granted membership). As an 'active member' (Adler & Adler, 1987), I also played a role in widening this community by bringing in backpackers, who played a lively - if transient - role in the community. Foreign national visitors were especially valued by inmates since they offered a forum for telling different kinds of stories than those which could be told to foreign national inmates. This was especially true with regards to hard luck, and hard life stories. Visitors were keen consumers of such stories, and were also highly credulous. All of this storytelling was rich territory for me, as a researcher, hoping to elicit and record a

variety of stories about imprisonment, but especially about drug trafficking. As Hammersley and Atkinson note, the processes of 'getting in' say much about the field (2007). Here understanding the role of storytelling in facilitating my access to the field also revealed the importance of narrative practices in prison. Ethnographic fieldwork is well placed to understand and appreciate the meaning and importance of storytelling in prison. Whilst Van Maanen (2011) and Adler and Adler (2008) note the ways in which ethnographic texts are structured by genre, this paper also throws light on the importance of storytelling in the field, particularly as a means of entering the field.

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