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Stuit, H.

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Metaphors of confinement: the prison in fact, fiction and fantasy, by Monika Fludernik, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 848 pp., £100 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-198-84090-9

Metaphors of Confinement: The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy's treatment of the occurrence, structure and social impact of carceral metaphoricity is

unprecedented in its scale and scope. It treats English literature by incarcerated writers, texts set in prisons and those foregrounding carceral metaphors. The corpus stretches from the twelfth to the twentieth century and although its main focus is on the English classics, it also discusses writers like Helon Habila, Breyten Breytenbach, Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Within this prison literature canon, Fludernik offers perspectives on the gendered differences in how entrapment is experienced, and not just in her incisive analyses of texts by the likes of Emily Dickinson, Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, Sarah Waters or Susan Glaspell. All texts are analysed internally, but also consistently linked to historical context, debates in adjacent academic disciplines like criminology and law, and current prison conditions.

A crucial insight acquired by this broad approach is, in the first place, just how pervasive metaphors of confinement really are. 'Prisons', Fludernik states, 'are (perceived to be) everywhere, in language, in texts, in images, in our minds' (p. ix). They are in the news (think of Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and more recently, the re-education camps in Xinjiang or the prison riots at the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns) but they are also seated in our fantasies, pervading 'social and societal arenas that have no immediate connection with crime, punishment, the police or the law' (p. ix). Although most of the chapters in *Metaphors of Confinement* directly deal with prison settings, the carceral also recurs in experiences of confinement in relation to domesticity (chapters 4 and 8), colonialism (chapters 5 and 6), labour (chapter 7), love (chapter 8) and femininity (chapter 9).

Of course, carceral metaphors change over time, but as Fludernik shows, they also stubbornly persist through the ages, even if the fantasies and experiences bolstered by these metaphors are no longer corroborated by the realities in which prisons exist (p.16). When Janis Joplin sings in 1972 that her feelings for her lover are like a ball and chain, for instance, 'such a phrase harks back to pre-twentieth century penal policy (chaining convicts to cannonballs) and does not reflect contemporary practices of incarceration' (p. 52). In deceptively concise observations like this, which pepper the volume throughout, Fludernik touches the profoundly ambivalent heart of metaphor; although the ball and chain metaphor is compelling when read in the context of Janis Joplin as an inspiration for feminism, it is jarring in relation to legacies of slavery. Carceral metaphors reveal a great deal about the social structures and imaginaries in which they are produced and circulated.

Throughout, the book is attentive to this multiplicity of metaphor, shifting attention from the question whether the metaphors discussed are 'right or wrong' to how they work in context, what knowledges and ideologies they reproduce, and how they can be understood from a contemporary perspective. To Fludernik, metaphors are 'ideological foot soldiers' that perform cultural work by 'acting on readers' feelings and manipulating their subconscious attitudes and beliefs' (pp. 42, 53). Cultural work that consists of a simultaneous veiling and revealing of 'the real-life import of the politics and ethics of penal confinement' (p. xi). This becomes particularly clear in chapter 7, 'Industry and Idleness: Discipline and Punishment in the Capitalist Prison', which analyses metaphorical slippages between the factory, slavery, and the prison in the Victorian age. In sentimentalist discourses of the

time, features shared by all three conditions like enclosure, enforced discipline and a lack of fresh air created metaphorical parallels that served to question the 'working man's slavery in his native England' (p. 464). The emancipatory parallels of the metaphors, however, by contrasting the plight of women and children in appalling factory conditions to the well-deserved punishment of convicts, also shifted attention away from the hardship of male workers as well as from often unhealthy prison conditions. At the same time, the use of anti-slavery discourse contrasted free Britons with African slaves in ways that shrouded experiences of cruelty on plantations as well as Britain's colonial imbrications in the issue.

Through this emphasis on the ideological pliability of metaphor Fludernik ultimately asks: 'What are the function and uses of carcerality in our society? What are its ideological rewards and its psychological compensations?' (p. ix). The book is realistic and poised in how it deals with these questions. It does not lose itself in meditation on the boundless power of the imagination or the eternity of art, but stays close to its corpus and the (ethical) complexity of the topic. In the conclusion, Fludernik comments on the 'ambivalent and seedy' elements of carceral aesthetics and suggests that 'the true calibre of a (realistic) prison text might [actually] lie in its ability to create an aesthetics of boredom' (p. 629). Yet, sentimental and spectacular renditions of the prison also serve a further purpose related to the complicity that comes with literature's attempts to come to grips with the ineffable. 'Literary indulgence in fantasy tries to escape the clutches of carceral fears', Fludernik writes, but 'at the same time, it also attempts to return to the real experience of confinement, even pointing an accusing finger at society's (lack of) concern with that heterotopian space which is both inside and outside society' (p. 633).

This tension between fantasy and empathy leads to one of the main concepts of *Metaphors of Confinement*: the carceral imaginary. This carceral imaginary, characterised elsewhere by Fludernik as 'a collection of culturally relevant images and associations that define our society's *idées recues* about imprisonment',[1] is an 'emotional and psychological site of fantasy on which strategies of displacement and disavowal interact' (p. 57). Things collectively stored here often have a literary heritage like metaphors that cast the prison as a tomb or hell, or that compare the world itself to prison through perceived links to poverty, slavery or patriarchy. From Fludernik's mapping of this imaginary, a central paradox arises around the prison and the home, in which the prison comes to stand for the disruption of destroyed family idylls, picturesque landscapes, enclosures that serve as refuges (chapter 4) or rustic labour (chapter 7). Seeing all these associations laid out like this foregrounds the realisation that, as Fludernik puts it, prison 'may be a foreign country in which they do things differently, but it is a country that, troublingly, shares many features with our familiar world and casts a dark shadow over all our lives' (p. 633).[2] Dwelling in the carceral imaginary's exotic fantasies, however, also entails an 'unacknowledged complicity with society's penal systems' (p. 632).

This point is discussed in greater depth in chapter 6, 'The Cancer of Punitivity: Prisons of Slavery and Hell'. The chapter draws out the connections between prison systems and colonialism by scrutinising the punitive glue that holds

them together. Through a discussion of anti-carceral polemics in literary and non-literary texts from the United States, Fludernik makes clear that reform and punishment are incompatible terms and that fantasies of punitive vengeance far exceed policies seeking to create legal sanctions that function retributively. Instead, punitivity should be recognised as a 'form of imaginary violence directed against persons perceived to be morally or racially inferior who then become the projection screen for repressed drives under the guise of moral duty and benevolent patronizing' (p. 372). Punitivity thus 'lies at the centre of social and political self-understanding' (p. 361) and potentially turns any society into an inherently carceral experience, as Richard Wright also made clear in *Native Son* (p. 367). The chapter then moves to a discussion of colonialism as the roots of punitivity, focusing on the colonial prison as a site of transformative hybridity 'in which both resistance and negotiation counterpoint the exercise of top-down power' (p. 374). In this way, the problems of punitivity and colonialism shed light on each other and gain even more depth. Fludernik highlights a potential for disrupting punitive attitudes in the coloniser by positioning him/her as both complicit to and victim of his/her own system of dominance (p. 379), while making clear that in prison-like societies like apartheid South Africa, it becomes sadly possible to say that the only place for a right-minded individual is the prison itself (p. 398).

Although this chapter contains one of the book's strongest political standpoints and its most evocative condemnation of the punitive complicity that lurks in the carceral imaginary, it is also one of the moments where the discussion feels a little too technical and the choice of angle and scope could be questioned. It jumps context quite abruptly, with the part on punitivity leaning towards the United States, while the colonial part proceeds to discuss Kipling's character Strickland in India, the role of slavery in Robben Island prison in apartheid South Africa, and Sam Mapsu's memoirs about his incarceration in Malawi. This results in a chapter that has to work very hard to contextualise the authors it discusses (of which there were already four in the first part). Ultimately, it could perhaps have done more to discuss the links between prison and slavery from the perspective of Black experiences in the United States in the first part[3] and could have made more room for the highly relevant connections it makes between global trends of punitivity and colonial heritage in the second.

However, the book is extremely well-researched and packed with knowledge about the literary texts discussed, theories of metaphor, and the cultural role of the prison. It is a very generous gift to scholars who have a curiosity about any of these topics. For literary scholars, the pleasures may be even more pronounced because of Fludernik's methodological control and the book's commitment to add to existing readings of the works discussed. The writing is soberly beautiful and glows with theoretical richness, especially in the conclusions of the chapters where Fludernik substantiates the workings and effects of the constant slippages between fact, fiction and fantasy that her analyses so meticulously reveal. In these places, *Metaphors of Confinement* sometimes seems to hold back in terms of the broader relevance of its conclusions. At the same time, however, it also leaves the reader inspired to pursue those resonances and to look for alternatives to the

'recurrent lapses into punitivity and our clinging to the prison as the prime model of dealing with crime' (p. 361).

There is also a wealth of knowledge for disciplines other than literary studies. Besides deftly handling argumentative unity in a corpus with a size that would drive other scholars to distraction, *Metaphors of Confinement* is founded on a linguistic data set, which can be accessed and studied in the appendices. In the aforementioned chapter 6, Fludernik offers incisive readings of how punitive desires have shaped the Western world that are of great value to criminology, security and surveillance scholars. The chapter on the role of labour and idleness in the nineteenth century prison offers new avenues of research for anyone eager to study the imbrications of (domestic) colonisation, prison systems and liberal governance. In other words, this promises to become a canonical work that contributes greatly to the possibility of fruitful interdisciplinary conversation between literary and cultural studies, law, carceral geography, political science, security studies or anthropology. However, in all its heft, *Metaphors of Confinement* is, first and foremost, 'an indictment of carceral heterotopias from a humanitarian and ethical perspective; an argument pioneered by literature from its inception' (p. xiv).

Notes

1. Monika Fludernik, 'Metaphoric (Im)prison(ment) and the Constitution of a Carceral Imaginary', *Anglia*, 123.1 (2005), pp. 1–25.
2. For a full list of metaphoric associations, see Chapter 10. The carceral imaginary also contains imagery and plot twists that are more familiar from prison films rather than from literature. The most dominant of these are romanticisations of riots and the escape motif.
3. Possible intersections with work by Simone Browne on the surveillance of blackness and by Kathryn Yusoff on fugitivity come to mind.

Hanneke Stuit
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
h.h.stuit@uva.nl

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