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DOI

[10.5040/9781350298095.0013](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350298095.0013)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Carceral Worlds

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Weegels, J. (2024). Carceral Reverberations. In H. Stuit, J. Turner, & J. Weegels (Eds.), *Carceral Worlds: Legacies, Textures and Futures* (pp. 79-84). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350298095.0013>

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Carceral reverberations

Julienne Weegels

My body, my life
are broken.
Everything I achieved
obliterated.
There's never been a 'rule of law'
just the logics of exclusion
and abuse.¹

State violence reverberates far beyond its situated enactment. It becomes an intrusive part of the minds and bodies of those who are subjected to it. Relived long after the (repetitive) act itself has ceased, it nestles into memories, joints and ligaments, nightmares and pits of churning stomachs. Carceral control leaches on these after-effects to live *on*, permeating people's bodies and decisions by way of the fear, paranoia and stress that persist alongside the direct physical, social and economic consequences of detention.

Run/hide

'In prison you gotta understand that you're blind, deaf, and mute, that you don't see or hear anything even if it happened right in front of you,' Javi stresses. The violent punishment that the breaking of prison secrets entailed reverberated in his words and body, even after having put an ocean between himself and Nicaragua. As we talked about those parts of prison life that were generally rendered unspeakable – the beatings by both prisoners and authorities, the corruption, the indoor drug trade – his verbal repetition of this rule pointed out how he had learned to carefully mute his senses, to un-see, un-hear and

¹ All names are pseudonyms. This poem is a compilation of interactions with Layo (translated from Spanish), who is part of my ongoing research on the emergence and workings of Nicaragua's hybrid carceral system as experienced by its 'carceral subjects'.

un-speak, in order to survive the eight and a half years he spent inside. (Weegels 2021: 89)²

Before the massive anti-government uprising that shook Nicaragua mid-2018 was met by brutal state repression – resulting in over 300 deaths and, by mid-2019, more than 1,600 arbitrary detentions (IACHR 2018) – I spent some seven years inside this beast’s belly³ conducting a multisited prison ethnography alongside a prison theatre initiative. Over the years, my time spent with (formerly) incarcerated people began to point to systemic abuses of power and force, collusion over illicit markets and extensive institutional politicization, as a conglomerate *Sistema* of legal and extralegal powers emerged beyond Nicaragua’s official penal state, dependent on a network of affective ties to the party state. In order to persist within this politicized institutional environment, I too, like Javi, learned to partake in public secrecy and practice concealment (Jefferson and Schmidt 2019; Taussig 1999). Stretching out like an Agambean ‘no-man’s-land between public law and political fact . . . in which what is at stake is a force of law without law’ (2005: 39), the *Sistema* came to constitute a hybrid carceral system of sorts. Out of earshot, many of my research collaborators noted that it was impossible to hide this truth ‘behind a finger’.⁴ Yet the *Sistema*’s growling punishments of revelation – directly and by proxy – signalled the tight and extensive grip it could exert. In effect, speaking truth to power most invariably resulted in exclusion, or abuse.

*

It’s late June 2018 when I am glued to my computer as Nicaraguan state forces, in collaboration with armed party militants organized into para-police groups, unleash a brutal ‘Clean-Up Operation’ against protesters manning makeshift barricades and occupying university buildings. If my friends go offline for more than an hour, the common understanding is to assume they’ve been detained – or worse. From across the Atlantic, my computer and smartphone have become the ‘sites’ from which I witness the unleashing of the beast. The exteriorization of Nicaragua’s hybrid carceral system. Its enactment far beyond the walls of its overcrowded prison system. But those aren’t the terms I’m thinking with now –

² Interview with Javi in 2017.

³ Abbott 1978; Wacquant 2002.

⁴ The Nicaraguan proverb is ‘*no se puede tapar el sol con un dedo*’ – you cannot block the sun with a finger. In other words, obvious truths are so bright and big they are impossible to hide behind a finger.

it's not research but life as we, in varying degrees of collective shock, realize what the system is capable of. The full extent of it is still beyond reach as the beast runs loose, roaming the streets in search of bodies to feed on – spitting some back out mutilated or dead while hoarding others inside its belly.

I renew my feed for updates. Throughout the uprising, the protesters document everything around them, maintaining an extensive digital grapevine. A new livestream appears. From behind half-closed shutters a shaking phone zooms in on operatives roaming the street. 'They're here, they're here . . . please don't abandon us,' a female protester's off-camera voice pleads in quivering whispers. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The name of the neighbourhood resonates. Days before, a friend's picture was circulated on pro-government social media with a call for their deliverance to the Special Forces – he's there.

I message him, without reply.

Minutes, then hours, creep by.

I wake up to news of a young man shot dead at a barricade – eight rounds of AK-47 bullets lodged in his body. And there's a message from my friend. He is alive but not well. The screams of the young man's mother over her son's dead body replay on a loop in his mind.

The next time he's offline for multiple hours, the beast has swallowed him.

He is caught inside its belly.

A fear nestles inside my chest that any next message can be a bad one. Though it is the medium through which we organize against the beast, my phone has simultaneously become the carceral device to hold me in its grip – the device through which its control diffracts and reverberates far beyond the borders of national territory.

Don't/speak

'If I stop moving, I'll break,' Fito says. It's spring 2023 now – almost five years later – and we are sat on the floor in a circle. Moments earlier, Fito had read out a letter bidding farewell to his homeland as a part of a theatre-making process in exile. Though his letter had lacked direct connection to his emotions, in listening to the others share their letters he had sketched a self-portrait on the back of the page. A thick jagged pencil line runs down the middle of the drawing's face.

Broken, but whole.

The pieces held together by constant movement.

As his words sink in, the weight of what happened to him acquires presence among the exiled participants. A punch in the gut. Kicks to the head. A hand wrapped around his mouth while a foreign body does the unthinkable. The word pair 'arbitrary detention' cannot begin to grasp the intentionality of the violence he was made to experience. Stop. He does not cry. The events remain unspoken between us.

*

Silence. The beast's objective is silence. The weight of all I got to know about the inside of its belly unintentionally crushes those around me. *Infiltrator*. Carceral reverberations rendered unspeakable as the system tightens around my throat. Breathe. Speak up, but not too loud. Don't let them know it's *you*.

A few months earlier, Troy said he felt he had become 'like a pest'. So, in an attempt to avert the diffraction of carceral control unto those he held dear, he decided he had to become invisible. 'I want to bring [to stage],' he added, 'the fear of being seen.' I know it sounds contradictory, going on stage *and* remaining invisible. But masks exist for a reason. And silence can be meaningful. Even as carceral control continues to reverberate in bodies chewed on by the beast – as actual threat mixes with practices of self-censorship – the paralysis it produces is temporary. Resistance is the constant. Troy did take the stage/masked. I will keep speaking/alias. Layo continues to make theatre, and Fito went so far as to denounce the beast to the UN Committee Against Torture. Though a full account of all the ways in which we – both individually and collectively – attempt to undermine the beast's grip would be irresponsible to reveal, we find resistance in producing this illegibility.

If carcerality is a product of modernity and coloniality, both of which strive for the linear and hierarchical identification and categorization of human and non-human bodies, the rupture of such systems is perhaps epitomized in the rupture and confusion of these ordering capacities. In the deliberate production of illegibility and invisibility, of obfuscation. In prison, we made theatre without words. While this may seem like hiding – and to a certain extent it is – it can also be taken as mocking, which has a long history in lower-class and indigenous contestations of power. During the San Jeronimo festivities in Masaya, for instance, the *torovenado* mocks powerholders from behind artisanal masks, temporarily switching genders and social position, the male becoming female, the brown white, the margin brought literally into centre-town (Blandón Guevara 2003). Layo's latest play builds on this. Carcerality does the opposite – it marginalizes, sanitizes, separates. Producing and reaffirming normative social

categorizations and geographies of inequality, it impinges itself more brutally on particular intersections of such categories and geographies – the young Black or brown man, the urban margin, the socially deviant or mentally disturbed – trying to excise transgression from society and, inside its institutions, from the carceral body itself.

In times of political turmoil these effects are magnified and diffracted to the extent the beast draws into its vise those usually considered ‘innocent’. Fixed categories of carceral subjection expand outward, affirming but also disturbing the usual gendered, classed and racialized order as dissidence and opposition are criminalized. Yet the beast’s concomitant loss of legitimacy provides opportunity for reverse diffraction, too – for carceral confusion rather than control to reverberate both outside and within its institutions, towards liberation (Gilmore 2022). The beast’s objective is silence, yes, but as a product of control, not resistance.⁵ Let us not be trapped into revealing ourselves entirely then, as we articulate the justice-seeking initiatives and abolitionist geographies needed to dislodge the various beasts we face. Let us practice our abilities to obfuscate and confuse and fortify our right to privacy and dignity.

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⁵ See also Padraic Kenney (2017), particularly on ‘confusing the prison’ (174–204).

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