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Carceral Soundscapes: Creation of A Prison Poetics

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Abstract

My central research focus seeks to define a poetics of the carceral; to accomplish this goal, I study the relationship between inmate authors, the space of the prison, and the soundscapes their works create. Building off of scholars like Nicole Fleetwood, I expand her frameworks to examine how the material shape of the prison is revealed through and imprinted on the work of incarcerated poets. In my paper, I argue that inmate authors articulate the prison experience in unique ways by reconstructing and experimenting with sound to push back against a dehumanizing carceral space. I begin by foregrounding the work of Reginald Dwayne Betts, as he uses the material prison to create soundscapes of his experience. His material use of legal documents and prison moderators creates a tension between the sounds the prison implicitly creates, and those Betts explicitly recreates. The sensory experience of prison, how it is heard and seen, and the recreations of that experience allow us to understand the architecture of carceral space. Ultimately, my paper identifies new directions for analyzing how inmate artists transform the experience of carceral space and inscribe the material life of the contemporary American prison into poetry.

Keywords: carceral poetics, soundscapes, carceral architecture, prison poetry

Introduction

Reginald Dwayne Betts emerged from prison as a poet. As such, his verse deeply engages with exactly what it means for poems to be created *from* the prison. Born in 1980 during the peak era of mass incarceration, Betts was incarcerated at 16 years old and sentenced for nine years. Since then, he has published three poetry collections and been awarded the Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships. His published poems, his recordings from prison, and his Spotify album, *House of Unending,* deserve critical attention for advancing our understanding of "carceral poetics," the poetic techniques that imaginatively convey the carceral experience. This essay analyzes how Betts creates soundscapes that move his verse both in and out of the prison

and how Betts adapts the raw materials of imprisonment, including legal documents, to capture the voices and sounds that the prison leaves behind. By expanding our understanding of how the prison leaves its mark within a poem, I argue that Betts articulates the prison experience in powerful ways, reconstructing and experimenting with sound to push back against a dehumanizing, carceral space.

The rise of prison studies as a discipline has fueled curiosity and academic interest in how the material life of the prison leaves its mark on art, poetry, and literature. The pioneering work of H. Bruce Franklin emphasized how the early work songs of black convicts launched a tradition of prison poetics. The importance of sound in the earliest iterations of the field signaled a perspective through which I will examine more modern prison poetry. Beyond sound, Franklin establishes that "Black prisoners embody in both their lives and their culture the most thorough historical continuity within Black experience in America" (Franklin, 1989, p. 100). The development of prison literature as it connects to African American literature is essential to consider, as black poets are especially important drivers of carceral aesthetics. With Franklin as a starting point for understanding the intersection of race and sound in prison poetics, I focus my work similarly on the shape of identity, sound, and space within the field. More recently, Nicole Fleetwood's critically lauded study, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, expands scholarly methods for interpreting creative works produced out of paint, paper, hair gel, and other materials available to incarcerated artists. Fleetwood defines carceral aesthetics as "the production of art under the conditions of unfreedom," which I expand to include poetry, both printed and spoken word (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 25).

Drawing inspiration from these scholars, my argument focuses on poetry written by incarcerated people and how the material conditions of the prison are revealed through and

imprinted on their work. Rather than confine the prison to a theme, my work seeks to explore how a poem emerges from the place of the prison through being read aloud and attending to its use of sound for effect. Through the poetic works of Betts, we can see how the material place of the prison emerges within what I refer to as the "carceral architecture" of their poetry. Exploring what the material place produces from the inside requires a close look at the work produced by incarcerated artists. Some scholars, like Caleb Smith, argue that "writings by inmates do not hold such special status," as non-incarcerated people have also produced literature that explores the relationship between "punishment and the carceral imagination," (Smith, 2011, p. 20). However, contemplating how the physical space of the prison and the ensuing transformation of inmates because of and within that space, requires that our understanding be informed by those whose identities are altered as a result of that space. As such, we must look specifically at incarcerated authors when seeking to understand the prison's material imprint in poetry and the soundscapes created through that same space.

The Sound of Silence

Reginald Dwayne Betts's poetic knowledge was honed in the prison and further developed after his release. His 2019 collection, *Felon*, opens with the line "Name a song that tells a man what to expect after prison" (Betts, 2019, p. 1). The rest of his collection seeks an answer to that question, drawing on his intensive knowledge of poetry, song, and legal proceedings. "Ghazal," the inaugural poem of *Felon*, draws upon an Arabic poetic tradition of the "ghazal," in both its title and form. The invocation of "a song" and the titular reference to Middle Eastern song traditions establish the importance of vocalization to his collection. The auditory emphasis also draws upon the progenitor to prison poetry, plantation and slave songs. The poem follows a ghazal's pattern, repeating the same two-word refrain throughout the last

stanzas and culminating in the poet's naming. Betts' work relies upon this structure, repeating the refrain: "after prison." He finishes the poem by giving his name, as is custom of the genre. However, he does not give himself his birth name, but rather the one he took on in prison: "Shahid". In doing so, Betts establishes that through the prison experience, he has transformed and claimed for himself a new identity, setting the intention of his collection. Some readers engage with Betts' poems solely as a written piece and miss how the poems take new shape when performed aloud. Betts' vocalizations are unique in that when his poetry is spoken aloud it is significantly different than when it is silently read. Many of his poems undergo structural and line changes when Betts performs them in interviews, public appearances, and on his Spotify album. Notably, he does not alter the poems in any way when later republishing them. For example, the "Redaction" series in *Felon* are reproduced without alteration in his later collection, *Redaction*. This seems to indicate that the alterations do not stem from the passage of time, but from the form and space in which they are delivered. These changes are key for Betts to establish the lasting effects of the prison.

To illustrate the difference between the text as printed word and the text as spoken by Betts, we must closely examine both renderings of his poetic works. In "The Lord Might Have Given Him Wings," Betts places the lines disparately across the page. The structure of this work leaves the reader stranded within the "prison's vastness," a framework established within "Ghazal" (Betts, 2019, p. 1). The lack of guidance forces the reader to pause before each succeeding line in their own reading of the poem. The lines create uneven waves, as the reader is thrown into the poem, left subject to Betts' mirroring of the ocean's undercurrent as it pulls the reader in and out with the tide. Betts structures the poem in such a way that makes it impossible to orient yourself to its parameters. The tide of his writing relays the "something bewildering that

happens when you move from freedom to incarceration" and uses the conceit of the ocean to convey to the reader the unfamiliar space of the prison (Watkins & Betts 2020). Through the lack of structure, through the ocean and its waves, Betts conveys the way in which those imprisoned "recognized that ocean, that thing, is what you spend the rest of your life trying to get back across to this thing that we call freedom" (Watkins & Betts 2020). Despite the physical differences of the two geographies, as the ocean's vastness directly contrasts the prisons' confinement, both leave one lost and appear unending.

The poem uses its distinct structure to strand the reader when they read it to themselves; however, as Betts is familiar with the terrain his poem recreates, he can navigate the waters of his words without hesitation or confusion. In the reading of his poem aloud, Betts reads without pause (Betts, 2017). Listening to him speak the words alters the reader's experience of being adrift, in understanding and, like Betts, struggling to stay afloat within the violent, choppy environment of the poem. Instead, Betts's fluid speech evinces his familiarity with the space of both his poem and the prison and calls attention to the clarity of his navigation. In performance, he seeks to convey more than the page can hold. Betts expands upon many of his stanzas when reading them aloud; the line "the ones who abandon him" becomes "the ones who abandon all of them fathers and democracy friends hope all of them except his mother who is there to witness this history" (Betts, 2017). His performance implicates all who participate within these systems, indicting those who create his felt experience of abandonment behind bars in a way different from what is on the printed page.

Betts conveys blank space differently in his "Redaction" poems, which black out words and phrases on official legal documents and forms to transform the legal materials of the prison into works that voice the bare bones of prison's nature. Throughout these poems, Betts strips

away the superfluidity of legal jargon and reveals the underlying prison violence. While visibly transforming and reshaping official documents in print by blacking-out words, the poems again demand a different kind of interpretation when read aloud, since the reader cannot hear the large chunks of texts that are visibly disfigured to create the poem. Instead, Betts's oral performance of blackout poems expresses the concealed and confined, the broken and erratic natures of these sentences. In reading the words through the blacked-out pages, one must take the time to pause and find the next word. This creates an uneven cadence to the voice of the work, reflecting how words could not always be spoken aloud together. Besides the spoken word, the silence left between lines becomes a force to voice the conditions those imprisoned are forced to endure, further revealing the violence engendered by the prison.

Likewise, the printed experience of Betts' poem, "In Alabama" conveys different forms of violence in the prison than the poem does when spoken aloud by Betts. In the poem, "In Alabama," the words "pay" and "day" repeat and punctuate most lines leading towards the end of the page. This repetition heightens the reader's notice of the last line's content. The page concludes by revealing the conditions that prisoners are forced to endure, "scrubbing feces and blood from jail floors" (Betts, 2019, p. 18). The harsh break to this rhyme scheme places a strong emphasis on what matters within the document: the inhuman treatment of incarcerated people. Repeating these rhymed words also renders the reader within the prison's repetitive nature. However, because the rigid form of the poem precludes Betts from shaping the line breaks himself, reading the poem silently may not reveal the sound patterns in the same respect. The continual, uniform days can be felt by the reader through the speaking of these words. In this way, the poem must be read aloud to fully understand the space they both enter and then reconstruct. The reading aloud of a redaction provides a formal challenge itself, as it raises

questions on the delivery of the poem. How does one read a poem preoccupied with empty space? Through Betts' own readings of his redaction poems, we can better understand how this form of poetry functions. He further complicates our interpretations of the work when he makes changes to the fixed form of his poems. We can best draw out Betts' intentions in his work when we consider the changes he creates through the vocalization of his work. The Spotify recording of "In Alabama," Betts begins halfway through the poem. In doing so, he omits the opening lines that explain why the plaintiffs were imprisoned. Instead, the poem becomes one focused on the people being forced "cleaning the City scrubbing/feces and blood from jail floors" (Betts, 2019, p. 18). The rest of the poem repeats the stories of the various plaintiffs, highlighting their lives outside of the prison. He writes on "a 23-year-old woman mother of two," a "58-year-old disabled resident" and a "38-year-old father lives / with his children" (Betts, 2019, pp. 21-23). These short descriptions allow for the listener to reimagine the people in this document as human beings with lives outside of the prison that encages them. His repetition of their positionality, rather than their status as prisoner, forces the listener to acknowledge the plaintiff's humanity. Betts shifts the narrative from their relegation to plaintiff to their personhood and the inhuman treatment they endured in prison. Bett's discretionary start refocuses the purpose of his writing, which is to highlight the space's conditions. The oral presentation by Betts creates a different experience for the listener and reshapes the space he creates.

While most of the redaction poems are assembled lawsuits premised on the unlawful treatment of individuals now out of prison, one poem is created out of a *habeas corpus* document. None of the other redaction poems clarify the specific nature of the legal document, but the *habeas corpus* petition makes clear its intent: to argue that a person has been unlawfully detained. Its precise translation makes the provocative demand, "you shall have the body"

(Merriam-Webster, 2024). Betts refocuses the reductionistic legal language to instead explore the humanity of the plaintiff as more than just 'the body'. "In California" retells the life of the man imprisoned and presents a plea for the release of his body. Betts "shows readers the body" of the prisoner in humanized form, revealing the man and his crime posed "no/ threat of great bodily harm" (Betts, 2019, p. 59). The poem begins by establishing the man's former home and occupation as "a 63-year-old man a retired shipyard/laborer a lifelong resident" (Betts, 2019, p. 59). A laborer's work invokes the body's physicality, while the condition of resident places the body at rest in a rooted location. With these lines, Betts brings forth where the body is supposed to exist and the humanity of the places in which it exists, as a specific contrast to the prison. The body of the man who is held is also positioned against the bodies of others. This positionality emphasizes how his body does not pose a threat to others, demonstrating that there is no body to present, i.e. no habeus corpus. Betts continues humanizing the man's body, redacting words and phrases to call attention to "Humphrey's advanced age/ lifelong resident of San Francisco/ shipyard laborer" (Betts, 2019, p. 60). These descriptions lay claim to where his body belongs and that he is alive and is more than just another body within the system. The repetition of these descriptions that Betts highlights is further emphasized through the oral presentation of the lines. The space and silence between the moments of descriptions demonstrate the prison's attempts to erase the body from its context.

While Betts emphasizes Humphrey's rootedness, the state argues that he must be contained, highlighting the violence of keeping him trapped within the carceral space of the prison. The "prosecution argued /public safety flight risk concerns" (Betts, 2019, p. 61). Despite establishing that the man poses no threat to others' bodies, his own is held by this argument. There is also a juxtaposition between the argument of the man's possibilities for

escape and the establishment of the man as a deep-rooted member of the community. Betts integrates the man into the community with his repetition of the man as a "lifelong resident" (Betts, 2019, pp. 59-60). Despite the roots he holds in this place and the condition of being there, the argument that Humphrey will leave holds him in prison. There is another moment that Betts presents as he pushes against the place where his body is held. The last page of the redaction poem reveals that in lieu of prison, the man has been offered a spot at "Golden Gate for Seniors" and he "asked to be released to Golden Gate/ /emphasized advanced age/treatment for battle with addiction" (Betts, 2019, p. 62). Contrasting the expansive image of the Golden Gate to the prison bars behind that he is currently kept allows Betts to reveal that it does not matter the condition of the man, but rather it is the system that is concerned with the act of holding another decontextualized body. The poem argues that the system does not consider the place of the human, rather they are "just about saying that we don't want you to be free" (Watkins & Betts, 2020). The poem ends with a profound repetition of the purpose of the document: "release/ not to detain him release / release" (Betts, 2019, p. 62). Through this repeated refrain, Betts strips the superfluous and allows the poem to argue what the document is demanding: the corporeal release of a human being. The silence in between the lines creates a texture in the narrative that recontextualizes the body as it should be considered, rather than as the system has held it.

Betts gives voice to the muted stories of imprisonment and prisoners to in other innovative ways. In the first poem of his Spotify track, "Essay On Reentry," Betts calls the man he wrote the poem for, Fats, and reads it aloud to him. Fats is still incarcerated when this call takes place and Betts records the outgoing prison message along with Fats voice in response to his call and subsequent reading. These recordings add layers of meaning to the original poem,

which is now transformed into a Spotify track that includes Betts reminiscing with the inmate, the inmate's response to the poem, and the prison's own declaration that its calls are surveilled and monitored. Through the call and speaking aloud of his work, Betts enters the prison's architecture and recreates those conditions for the listener. By including the voice that controls the phone lines, Betts inextricably ties the poem to its material subject, the prison, quite literally conveying the voice of the prison while pushing back against its dehumanization. As the voice of the moderator speaks, Betts speaks over it to explain what will happen over the course of the track. In doing so, Betts asserts his own voice over that of the prison and redefines the balance of power and who is given a voice. Rather than closing with Betts' words, the Spotify adaption of the poem closes with the voice of the man who Betts is speaking for. The track ends with Fats saying "yeah" and laughing. Giving Fats the space to voice his reaction allows Betts to push back against the regulations of the prison. Fats's own vocalization provides an even deeper layer to Betts' reconstruction of the prison as Fats is actively experiencing the conscriptions and oppression of the prison in real time. Betts may reveal and create the confines of the prison within his work, but Fats is the only voice actively oppressed in the moment. The poem was written to give voice to Fats's story, and through its vocalization to Fats, Betts captures both his story and his actual voice.

Ironically, the prison poem he read to the inmate was recorded by the prison itself. The voice states that calls are recorded. The voices in these recordings are held by the prison to use them to keep prisoners in confinement or to be used against them. Betts recording the call with his own purpose reimagines the voice on the end of the line as having a story and laugh worth sharing rather than a voice to keep him further confined. Not only does Betts' reconfigure the voice of the prison in his recording, but he creates opportunities to listen to the exchange

available for the public to access. The production and publication of his album, and its accessibility as free media, actively opposes the regulations of information that the prison dictates. In the same way his redaction series makes legal documents accessible to the public, Betts implicates the voice of the prison and provides it to the public to engage them in an important exchange of experience. By circulating and distributing this recording, Betts reshapes prison surveillance technology to animate the voices of those kept inside. His subversion of the authoritarian recording forces the prison surveillance to record and preserve Betts' poetry.

The prison is a distinctly unique and inaccessible space. As such, conveying its oppressive nature to others proves challenging. However, listening to those incarcerated invites audiences to better comprehend the prison space through the voices of those incarcerated. Through hearing these poems spoken aloud, as the poets intended, we can better understand what it means for a poem to be from prison. The material markings of the prison can be heard, felt, and seen through the construction of the poems by authors who have most immediately experienced its architecture. In refocusing our attention onto incarcerated poets, we can better develop the prison literature genre and understand the implications for the space and systems as we allow them to exist today.

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